

# **The Zookeeper's Wife Study Guide**

**The Zookeeper's Wife by Diane Ackerman**

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## Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this guide: Ackerman, Diane. *The Zookeeper's Wife: A War Story*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2007.

*The Zookeeper's Wife: A War Story*, by Diane Ackerman, tells the true story of Antonina and Jan Zabinski who helped rescue hundreds of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II by hiding them in the empty animal enclosures at the zoo.

Before the war, the Warsaw Zoo was an idyllic place filled with beautiful plants and the sounds of the animal residents. Jan and Antonina lived in the villa on the zoo grounds and Antonina loved waking each morning to the noises of the animals. She was in charge of caring for the sick or orphaned animals as well as the family's pets. She also acted as a zoo guide for any important guests.

Jan met Magdalena Gross, a sculptor, while taking his daily bicycle ride through the zoo. She was fascinated by the animals and became friends with Antonina.

Polish and German relations were deteriorating. Antonina took Rys to their cottage in the country for a vacation. While there, two of Rys's friends told him that the beaches were being dug up to build fortifications. Antonina left Rys with his nanny and went back to Warsaw for the weekend to spend time with Jan. They discussed sending Rys somewhere safer before the war began. Jan was a veteran of World War I and a reserve officer, so he was on duty at night. The couple tried to go on foot to visit cousins, but had to turn back because the area was bombed. Jan sent Antonina back to the country house to be with Rys.

Days later, Jan went to the country house to bring Antonina and Rys back to Warsaw. The zoo had been hit by bombs and the polar bears had been shot when they escaped, along with several other animals Polish soldiers thought might be dangerous if they were to get out. When Jan was sent to the northwestern front, Antonina and Rys stayed with Antonina's sister-in-law. She did not feel safe in the fourth floor apartment, so they went to stay in a lampshade store on the first floor where several other people were staying as well. Warsaw surrendered and Jan and Antonina returned to the zoo. Jan became a part of the Polish Resistance and took risks to sabotage the Nazis.

Lutz Heck, the director of the Berlin Zoo and a Nazi, came to the Warsaw Zoo and offered to take the animals to Berlin to keep them safe. He took only the animals he felt were valuable and had the rest shot. The zoo was converted into a pig farm to supply pork to the German soldiers, but when the Germans failed to fund the pig farm in order to keep the animals warm and healthy during the winter, the pigs died off and the farm was closed.

The Jewish people were confined to an area of Warsaw called the Ghetto. Jan and Antonina vowed to help as many of them as possible to escape. They began accepting



“Guests” at the zoo who stayed temporarily until they could be moved to safer places. Antonina was in charge of caring for the Guests.

A German officer arrived at the zoo requesting to see the insect collection of Szymon Tenenbaum that Jan was storing at the zoo. The man was fascinated by the collection and Jan used this connection to gain access to freely enter the Ghetto. He then began sneaking people out of the Ghetto. When Szymon died, Jan brought his wife to stay at the villa.

Magdalena Gross refused to live in the Ghetto, so she lived in disguise as an Aryan working in a bakery. When she became worried that she would be recognized because she was famous, she became a Guest at the villa.

The Nazis built a fur farm at the zoo and hired a Polish man raised in Germany to run it. The Zabinskis called the man Fox Man and he turned out to be sympathetic to the Underground. Fox Man moved into the villa.

Antonina got pregnant and was confined to bed because of a painful leg condition. Maurycy Fraenkel, a friend of the family and a friend of Magdalena’s, came to live at the villa. He was suffering from a nervous condition brought on by the stress of the war and spent his first days sitting at Antonina’s bedside. He eventually got better and befriended Rys’s pet hamster. The man and the hamster became inseparable and were called “The Hamsters.”

Himmler ordered the extermination of the Jews in Warsaw’s Ghetto as a birthday gift for Hitler. The Jews resisted, but the Germans eventually set fire to the Ghetto causing ash to rain down on the city and the zoo.

Antonina was finally able to get out of bed in the spring. There was a fire in one of the German storage areas on the zoo. A soldier accused Antonina of starting the fire, but her quick thinking helped her to convince the man that the fire was started by a German soldier’s cigarette.

A former zoo guard saw Magdalena and it became unsafe for her to stay at the villa. Jan and Antonina used their connections with Zegota, a cell within the Underground that worked to rescue Jews, to move Magdalena to a safer place.

Antonina gave birth to a baby girl and they named her Theresa. The Guests held a christening party at the villa for her.

After a bomb exploded at Hitler’s headquarters in the Prussian forest, the Germans fled the area and went through Warsaw, burning buildings as they went. Jan was called to fight with the Polish Home Army. The Germans began to retreat, which allowed the Jews to move about more freely until Hitler ordered Himmler to send troops in to utterly destroy the city.

The Germans told Fox Man to take his animals to Germany. Antonina and Rys left with him. They lived in a schoolhouse in a town outside of Warsaw while Fox Man went on to

Germany. They heard nothing of Jan's whereabouts. She did not know he was in a POW camp. When the Uprising ended, she posted notices asking for information about her husband. She finally received a letter from Jan.

The Russian Army invaded Warsaw and drove the Germans out. Antonina and Rys returned to the zoo, which was almost completely destroyed. The villa remained, but it was damaged.

After the war, Jan came home and they repaired the zoo. Shortly after the zoo reopened, Jan retired as zookeeper. However, he continued his work on animal psychology and wrote several books. Antonina wrote children's books. Rys grew up and became a civil engineer and Theresa married and moved to Scandinavia.



# Chapters 1 - 7

## Summary

Diane Ackerman's *The Zookeeper's Wife: A War Story* is the true story of Antonina Zabinski and her husband Jan, who operated the Warsaw Zoo in Poland at the time of the German invasion in World War II. The Zabinski's use their wits and determination along with their connections to the Resistance to hide refugees from the Nazis.

Chapter 1: Antonina awoke to the sounds of the animals. Jan, who reminded Antonina of her father, woke earlier than she did. Antonina's parents were both shot for being members of the intelligentsia during the Russian Revolution when she was nine. Antonina's grandmother sent her away to study piano and attend school. She graduated at the age of 15. She then took classes in foreign languages and art. She met Jan while working at Warsaw's College of Agriculture. Both loved art and animals, so when the zoo directorship became available, they were both excited to take the job.

Antonina was pleased that her zoo gave people the chance to see animals they might not ever have gotten the chance to see elsewhere. The sounds of the animals waking in the morning was like a symphony. Antonina and Jan lived their lives according to the schedules of the zoo and the animals, with Antonina sometimes getting up in the middle of the night to act as a midwife to one of the animals.

The grounds of the zoo were beautiful and full of plants and trees that gave off lovely smells, like the linden trees that attracted bees. Old Town was visible across the river and beyond that was the Jewish Quarter, which was a large Jewish community.

The Zabinskis frequently had sick or baby animals in their house along with their pets. Antonina was in charge of feeding and training the animals. Their villa was decorated with all sorts of animal artifacts. Antonina had a special way with the animals she cared for that even Jan, a scientist, was surprised by. She started her mornings by sterilizing baby bottles to feed the baby lynxes. Some of the orphaned animals came to the zoo as the result of hunting. Her favorites were the lynxes. When her son was born in 1932, she named him Ryszard and called him Rys for short, which is Polish for lynx.

Chapter 2: A keeper told Jan that one of the rhesus monkeys, whose name is Adolf, had kidnapped a baby from another female and given it to his favorite mate. Other keepers gave Jan updates about the animals. Sometimes the zoo was the victim of thieves who tried to steal animals for the booming exotic animal trade. Jan's days were filled with the usual concerns of a zoo, such as making sure the animals were "healthy, sane, safe, and above all contained" (30).

Antonina went to the zoo office in the mornings to greet VIP visitors and guide them through the zoo. The tour of the zoo started with the flamingos because they were eye catching and then moved on to other birds of the world. Peacocks and deer were



allowed to roam the zoo freely. The zoo was also home to a large variety of other animals, including forest bison, big cats, elephants, and African wild dogs. There was also a baby elephant named Tuzinka who was one of only 12 elephants born in captivity at the time. Antonina had been there to see her born.

The smells of the animals were everywhere. Antonina believed it was important for people to connect with their animal nature through the animals and that the animals enjoyed contact with humans as well. She used the zoo as a means of advocating for conservation. Sometimes their animals were loaned out for use in movies as well as theater and music events.

Chapter 3: Jan took a daily bicycle tour of the grounds. One day he found a woman standing in front of a parrot cage mimicking the birds. He discovered her name was Magdalena Gross and that she was a sculptor. She and Antonina became friends.

In 1939 Jan and Antonina were making plans for hosting the International Association of Zoo Directors' meeting in the spring. The relationship between Poland and Germany was deteriorating and there was a threat of war. Antonina was an optimistic person, so she tried to concentrate on her child and her life. She took Rys, their dog, an ailing cockatoo, and a baby badger to their country home for a vacation. They spent the time playing with and training the baby badger, who began to exhibit a mix of animal instincts and human habits. At the end of the summer, when two of Rys's friends came to visit, they mentioned the beach being dug up to fortify it for the war. Antonina knew Rys wanted to ask her questions about war. She wondered what would happen if there was a war.

On the weekends, Antonina left Rys with his nanny and returned to Warsaw to be with Jan. On a visit in August, she was shocked to see anti-aircraft sites built around the city and civilians digging trenches. Jan knew that Poland could not compete with Germany in a war, so they talked about sending Rys somewhere safer.

Chapter 4: Antonina woke up to the sound of airplanes overhead. Jan was a World War I veteran and reserve officer, so he had spent the night on duty. Antonina did not know where he was stationed. When he returned home, Jan was agitated and wanted to leave immediately. Rys and his nanny were still at the country home. Jan and Antonina tried to go to a nearby village where some cousins lived. The animals at the zoo were agitated by the presence of soldiers. Antonina and Jan left on foot, but had to turn back when the area was bombed.

Jan decided it was best for Antonina to go back to the country home to be with Rys. Although the village of Rejentowka was only 25 miles away, the journey took seven hours because the roads were so packed with people fleeing the city, mostly on foot. German aircraft shot at the crowds of people. Antonina was glad that Rys was not there to witness it because she knew it would shape the rest of his life.

Jan arrived on September 5 and reported that the front had not reached Warsaw yet. He believed the army would protect the capital. They took a train back to Warsaw. When



they arrived, Antonina was surprised by the state of the zoo. It was on the river, which was hard hit by the bombings because of the busy bridges over it. The yard of the villa was cratered from bombs. The morning sounds of the animals were different now because they were frightened. The polar bears' mountain had been destroyed and Polish soldiers had shot the escaped bears. Then they killed some of the other animals they worried would escape, including the male elephant that was Tuzinka's father. Antonina lamented the way the war impacted the animals who could not move away like humans could.

On September 7, Jan was ordered to join the army along with all other able-bodied men at the northwestern front. All civilians were ordered to evacuate the zoo. Antonina and Rys went to stay with her sister-in-law.

Chapter 5: The lives of the Poles were reduced to just the essentials. Antonina became desperate to find a safer place for her son than her sister-in-law's fourth floor apartment. She decided to knock on the door of the lampshade store downstairs. There she was greeted by two elderly women who were sheltering many other people in their shop. Antonina thought about the plans she had had for the year, but now she wondered if they would even survive.

Britain and France declared war against Germany, which gave the Poles cause for celebration. However, there was no relief from the bombings. People rarely went out on the streets, but when Antonina did, she observed the city was in ruins. The building Antonina had been staying in was hit by a live shell that did not detonate. She moved Rys to the basement of a church, but later moved him back to the lampshade store in the morning. She heard no news of Jan, but decided she had to go back to the zoo and try to save the remaining animals. She left Rys with his aunt and crept back to the zoo, wondering if the animals shot early on were the lucky ones.

Chapter 6: A bomber attack on Warsaw devastated the zoo. Many animals were killed and others escaped. Antonina and some of the keepers searched the grounds to rescue animals and release others from cages. The mother elephant had died, but Tuzinka was still alive. The animals fled through Old Town. Antonina asked a soldier if he had seen a badger. He said a badger had tried to get into the villa and then gone to hide under the bushes. She hoped he had escaped.

Antonina left the zoo and went to one of the Resistance's hidden offices where she talked to her friend Adam Englert. He told her that the Polish army was out of supplies and planned to surrender. She returned to the lampshade store and told the others what Englert told her. Englert's message was different from the upbeat messages the mayor was giving on the radio.

Several days after Warsaw had surrendered Jan came to the store. He had left Warsaw with other soldiers a while back looking for a unit to join, but they had not found one. He had stayed at a farm of some people he knew. A German officer had knocked on the door and Jan had been asked to translate. The Nazi turned out to be Dr. Muller, a member of the International Association of Zoo Directors whom Jan knew well. Dr.





Muller told Jan about the destruction of the zoo and offered to help him return home. They decided on a plan to have Dr. Muller take Jan as a prisoner and then leave him in Warsaw.

When Warsaw was quiet, Jan and Antonina went to the zoo. They looked for wounded animals and buried the corpses of the dead ones. They had antelope, deer, and horse corpses butchered and given to hungry people in the city.

General Rommel urged the people of Warsaw to accept the surrender calmly. Antonina hoped the surrender might mean peace and a chance to rebuild. The German soldiers marched into town and people lined the streets to see them. Warsaw was under the rule of Hans Frank. Hitler had given him the authorization to exploit the city and bring it to complete ruin. Frank had all of the influential people in the city killed, including teachers, priests, landowners, politicians, lawyers, and artists. Many people were uprooted and some were shipped to Germany for slave labor. 330,000 people were shot.

The Polish Resistance worked to sabotage the Nazis, but were unsuccessful in an attempt to kill Hitler. One of their key strategies was to use pseudonyms so that no one knew the names of their superiors. This meant that if a member was captured, the core group would not be in danger. Jan was a great risk-taker for the Resistance.

Chapter 7: The autumn days were normally the days when activity at the zoo slowed down. The zoo should have been well-stocked for winter and preparations for the summer should have been underway. Instead, Jan and Antonina struggled to feed the animals and themselves. Two carts full of fruit and vegetable peelings from homes and restaurants arrived. The people of Warsaw were trying to help.

A German soldier arrived at the door with a message from Director Lutz Heck offering help. Antonina and Jan knew Heck from the International Association of Zoo Directors since he was also a zookeeper. He was of the camp that believed zoo enclosures should be as much like animals' natural habitats as possible. The Warsaw zoo had been designed this way. Heck had always been a little sweet on Antonina. Antonina responded to the soldier that they did not need help because the zoo was going to be liquidated, an idea that Antonina hated. The next day the guard came back and said that Heck would be visiting. Jan and Antonina hoped it meant help, but remained skeptical.

## Analysis

The Zookeeper's Wife falls under the genre of non-fiction. There is evidence of a great deal of research conducted in writing the book, both in the history of the war and the city as well as in the lives and appearances of the Zabinskis. For example, Ackerman writes about the polka dot dresses that Antonina favored and which arm Jan wore his watch on, explaining that she knows these things from having looked through pictures of the Zabinski family. However, Ackerman uses several literary conventions of fiction that make the book read more like a novel. For example, the book is structured around an animal motif that serves as a touching point while Ackerman explores the major themes



of the novel and also gives insight into the behaviors and emotions of the central figures. The Zabinskis' life is structured around the animals, so it is fitting that the book should be, too. Ackerman writes that they lived their lives according to the schedules of the animals and, as the book goes on, time is measured by what animals would be doing at the time, such as migrating or hibernating. Even the idea of the impending war is introduced through animals when Ackerman relates the story of a rhesus monkey named Adolf who was stealing infants from females to give to his favorite mate. Though the incident has nothing to do with the threat of war, Ackerman mentions Hitler as a means of reminding readers that the book takes place around the time of World War II. Later, readers will be reminded of the seemingly inconsequential incident when Ackerman writes about Nazis taking children with Aryan features to be raised in German homes.

Ackerman is also adept at descriptive prose, making the settings easy to visualize and evoking emotion in the reader when she describes the destruction of Warsaw and the zoo. She begins the book by describing the Warsaw Zoo pre-war. The zoo is designed to mimic the natural habitats of the animals who live there and it is apparent that there was a great deal of thought given to the human experience in the way that the zoo was laid out. For example, Ackerman writes that the flamingos were placed near the entrance because their bright color made them an eye-catching start to a zoo tour. In addition, rather than being a restrictive place where every animal is rigidly kept in an enclosure, some of the smaller animals, like the peacocks and deer, were allowed to roam freely about. This no doubt added to the thrill of a visit to the zoo since a visitor might encounter one of the free animals at any turn. Ackerman notes that the freely roaming animals were also a form of enrichment for some of the predators, indicating that Jan and Antonina had the welfare of all of their animals in mind as the zoo was developed.

Ackerman compares the zoo to Eden and uses other biblical references to reinforce the idea of the zoo being a paradise on Earth. She writes about the fragrant linden trees and their connection to Mary. The linden trees also attract bees, who are "revered as God's servants" because their wax is used to make candles used in church services (21).

To describe the sounds of the zoo animals, Ackerman uses a musical metaphor in which she describes the noises like a symphony. Ackerman incorporates musical terms and draws in the sounds of the animals once by one, until the reader can almost imagine the animal noises coming together in a cohesive orchestral piece. The metaphor is apt since Antonina studied piano as a girl and music was an important part of her life, as will become more apparent later in the book.

When the war started and Warsaw was bombed, both the city and the zoo experienced drastic changes. Ackerman returns to the sounds of the animals to illustrate how the violence changed the zoo. Instead of describing the sounds in musical terms, she uses words like "moaning," "yowling," and "sobbing" to describe the way the animals sounded. In describing the city, she uses a metaphor comparing the buildings to the



bodies of human beings. She writes that the buildings looked like people trying to cover their wounds and uses words like “blood red” and “steaming entrails.”

While the setting of the zoo is important to the story, of greater importance are the people who called the zoo home and used it as a place of refuge and compassion before the war and even more so during the war. Though Jan perhaps took greater risks during the war, it is Antonina that Ackerman focuses on as the central individual around which the book is written. Antonina was highly intelligent, which is indicated by the fact that she graduated from school at the age of 15. She was also educated in art, music, and foreign languages – all of which played a role in her life during the war. Antonina was also no stranger to war and understood the need for compassion because her parents were executed in the Russian Revolution when she was only nine-years-old. Perhaps Antonina’s defining characteristic is her connection with and understanding of animals. Jan believed she had a special ability with animals and could calm even the most difficult of creatures. As a result, Antonina was charged with caring for sick and orphaned animals, which made her day-to-day connection with the animals a hands-on occupation, giving her the opportunity to study the animals and their behaviors. The author also notes that Antonina had a fun-loving and optimistic spirit. Each of these characteristics were important to the way in which Antonina faced the war and cared for the Jewish people who hid at the zoo. The author introduces these characteristics early on so that they can be built upon to further define Antonina’s character and explain how she was able to do the things she did.

Jan is described as more of straight-laced, no nonsense sort of person. His greatest strength seemed to be in his ability to make connections with people. Jan was also interested in animal psychology, which he used in his interactions with people. His understanding of the animal mind, and thus human nature, made it possible for him to quickly grasp the motivation of an individual and to defuse a situation by changing his own behavior. Jan also had a great love for animals and was a compassionate man, but perhaps in quieter ways than those of his wife. Ackerman places Jan in the role of a secondary player in the story, though she does not underplay the great contributions he made to the rescue of hundreds of people. However, since the focus of the book is on Antonina, Jan’s activities are marginal to the story.

Ackerman also introduces readers to Antonina’s and Jan’s young son Rys. At this point in the book, Rys is mainly important as a focus for Antonina’s worry and compassion, so little is revealed about Rys except that he was a typical little boy living in an atypical home filled with strange pets. Even before the war began, Antonina was concerned about the way it would impact her son’s life. This was likely because her own childhood had been affected by war and she knew the ways in which it could change a person.

Another individual introduced in this section of the book is Magdalena Gross. Magdalena was a famous artist. Her connection to the zoo is important because it was there that she apparently got her start in sculpting animals, which propelled her to fame. More importantly, Magdalena and Antonina were close friends. The author introduces Magdalena here to show that she had a pre-war connection with the Zabinskis, which explains why her presence at the villa during the war was important to Antonina and,



later, so difficult to lose. The author indicates to the reader that Magdalena will be important to the story by stating “thus began what would become an important friendship” (36).

Ackerman introduces the primary themes of the book almost immediately. The most prevalent theme is compassion and its importance to the survival of humanity. Without the compassion of people like the Zabinskis, thousands more Jewish people would have lost their lives during the Holocaust. In this section, the author provides several examples of compassion. Antonina is the cornerstone of this theme as it was her compassion that helped the people who stayed at the villa to survive the war and to have moments of normalcy and even joy. In this section, however, the author focuses on the compassion Antonina extended to the animals in order to show that compassion was an ingrained aspect of Antonina’s personality, which was naturally extended to humans in their time of need. In this section, Antonina cared for baby and sick animals, and even took an ailing cockatoo on vacation with her just so she could continue to monitor its health. When she was forced to stay in the city at the beginning of the attacks, Antonina snuck back to the zoo just to try to help the remaining animals, though it put her life in danger.

Ackerman reinforces the importance of compassion by providing examples outside of the Zabinski family. In so doing, she communicates that through compassion there is hope even during war. The elderly ladies who ran the lampshade shop and sheltered people during the bombings are one such example. They opened their shop to people from other floors of the building as well as to people who were homeless or displaced because of the war. They shared both their space and their food with people they did not even know. Because of their compassion, the people who stayed there had a safe place to weather out the attack.

Another person who shows compassion is Dr. Muller, a German, who helped Jan return to Warsaw even though they were on opposite sides of the conflict. Ackerman may have included this example of German compassion to show that there were good people on both sides of the war, some of them were just following the orders of their government. Dr. Muller seems to be one such case.

Another major theme of the book is the theme of courage and the idea that courage displayed by people in weak positions is that much more awe inspiring. Antonina was certainly a person in a weak position since she was not only a citizen of Warsaw being attacked by the Germans, but also a woman in a time and place where women commanded less respect than they do today. The true measure of Antonina’s courage will be explored later in the book, but the author shows that even before she was involved in rescuing Jews, Antonina was a brave woman. She traveled crowded roads while being shot at by German airplanes to get back to her son at their country home. Her thoughts were primarily for her son instead of herself. That was again the case when the two stayed in the lampshade shop since she was worried more for Rys’s safety than her own.



The other themes that the author introduces in this section are the themes of home and family. The theme of home is introduced through her description of the zoo and what it was like to live there before the war. It was a happy, beautiful, and safe place, as a home should be. That notion of home is challenged as the author develops the theme throughout the war to show what it is that truly makes a place home. The theme of family is introduced here through the Zabinskis and their unconventional family of humans and animals. Antonina and Jan considered their pets and the animals at the zoo members of their family, even bringing exotic animals like lynxes and badgers into their house to share their lives. Later, the author will explore the idea that a family does not just include the nuclear family, but may also include others that one holds dear.

## Vocabulary

pandemonium, sober, cherished, skittish, ingenious, anecdotes, emphatic, seismic, disintegrated, agitated, incendiary, battalion, residue, melee, dispel, engulfed, lamented, catastrophe, seeping, altruists



## Chapters 8 - 15

### Summary

Chapter 8: Lutz Heck took over the Berlin Zoo from his father. Shortly after taking over the zoo, Heck joined the Nazi party. Lutz wanted to bring back three extinct species of animals, the forest tarpan, aurochs, and European bison, all of which had been native to Poland. Heck's passion for pure bloodlines was shared by the Nazis who wanted to create a "pure" human race. They believed that "mutations in human beings were as destructive as those in domestic animals" (83). Nazism had its roots in occultism where cultists believed in Aryan men who were god-like. Toward the goal of creating a race of pure Aryans, Nazis felt that it was necessary to eliminate all races they considered inferior.

Chapter 9: The sounds of morning in the zoo were now mostly non-existent. The windows were covered according to the rules of the blackout, so Jan and Antonina woke to darkness. Antonina was getting the house ready for Heck's visit. She liked Heck, though she found his political views naïve and thought he was a bit arrogant. Heck arrived and greeted Jan and Antonina warmly. Antonina was initially heartened by the conversation between Jan and Heck, which was probably about rare animals. Heck told them he would take their most valuable animals to his zoo. Heck admitted to them that he believed Germany had little chance of winning the war. They had no choice but to allow Heck to take the animals, which he said were only being taken on loan.

Chapter 10: Heck's personality seemed to change to fit the situation. He could be charming, but also cold blooded. Heck's visit to the Warsaw zoo was really for the purpose of taking the best animals and the zoo's breeding records. The Zabinskis worried that their zoo would eventually be torn down. However, Jan needed to stay at the zoo to play his part in the Underground. To disguise the zoo, Jan proposed to Heck that they raise pigs there to feed the German troops. After taking the animals he wanted, Heck had hosted a New Year's Eve shooting party and the rest of the animals were shot.

Chapter 11: Antonina was saddened by the silence of the zoo after the animals were all killed. It was different from the usual hibernation of that time of the year and Antonina wondered if they could see the war as a kind of hibernation for humans.

People were being beaten and arrested, deported to Germany, and executed. Germans were claiming Polish towns and speaking Polish was illegal. German troops were ordered to kill all Polish people, but keep the children who had Nordic features to be transported to Germany and raised like Germans.

At the end of the winter, the Zabinskis received the first of the pigs. They were mainly fed using scraps donated by restaurants and hospitals and with garbage that Jan collected in the Ghetto. Jan brought an orphaned piglet home for Rys to keep as a pet.



The pig was named Morys and lived in the house. Antonina loved watching them play in the garden as it allowed her to “retain a spirit of affection and humor in a crazed, homicidal, unpredictable society” (101).

Chapter 12: Antonina put together packages of food for friends inside the Ghetto. Jan delivered them when he went into the Ghetto to gather scraps for the pigs. At the beginning of the German occupation, people were able to disregard the things they heard about German brutality because they did not see them. However, the Jews were treated worse every day. In October of 1940, Warsaw’s Jews were ordered to leave their homes and gather in a district on one side of town, confining 400,000 people to only 20 or so blocks. This became the Warsaw Ghetto. At first, the Jews tried to go on as normal and there were cafes and places for artists. People thought the Ghetto was temporary because others could still come and go.

As a result of the racist Nuremberg laws, some Jews converted to Christianity. The Zabinski’s friends Adam and Wanda Englert divorced and planned for Wanda to “disappear” because of her part-Jewish ancestry. They held a party for Wanda on Midsummer’s Eve. Jan and Antonina left for the party, but took a detour to get cigarettes. There was an explosion and the trolley that Rys sometimes took home from school. They ran to the trolley, but did not find Rys. When they got home, Rys was not there either. He finally returned home and explained that a stranger had brought the children into his home when the bomb hit to keep them safe. The Zabinskis missed Wanda’s party, but she came to the zoo a short time later where she stayed on as Rys’s non-Jewish tutor.

Chapter 13: Jan and Antonina vowed to help as many Jews escape the Ghetto as possible. Jan felt a close tie to the Jewish community because he had gone to a school where the majority of the students were Jewish.

The zoo was not the ideal place to hide people because the Germans had built a weapons storehouse in the middle of the zoo. Soldiers were there often to enjoy the greenspace. Antonina never knew that Jan had built an ammunitions dump in the elephant enclosure for the Home Army. He believed the Germans would never expect the Polish to do something so brave and cunning, so the dump was never found. Jan was humble about his acts of resistance since he believed it was right to save anyone in danger, whether human or animal. Jan’s codename in the Underground was “Francis” after Saint Francis of Assisi.

Chapter 14: The Zabinskis received “Guests” who would pass through the zoo as they escaped. Sometimes people were unable to get the necessary papers and stayed at the zoo for years. The Zabinskis felt that the best way to hide the influx of Guests was to surround themselves by frequent visitors. Jan’s mother stayed with them often. Antonina was responsible for caring for the Guests’ intangible needs, like comforting a distressed person.

In Poland, harboring a Jew was punished by death. The person harboring the Jew was killed and so were all of their family and neighbors. Therefore, the business of hiding



Jews was very secretive. Antonina usually did not know the details about when or how Guests would arrive because Jan did the work with the Underground that involved planning. Jan sometimes brought boxes of things to be placed on a shelf of the kitchen and instructed others not to touch them, saying they were for research. They were actually fuses for making bombs because Jan was the head of a cell that sabotaged German trains. Jan also helped the Underground to build bunkers, which were used to hide people.

The zoo was preferable to the bunkers and was given the cryptonym “The House Under a Crazy Star.” In comparison to the bunkers, the zoo seemed like a paradise where people were hidden by the presence of more people and animals. However, there was still a feeling of paranoia and people grew used to hiding their movements and being quiet.

With so many people in the villa, Antonina’s household chores grew. The chores were calming, though, since they offered a monotony and an escape from the constant vigilance. When German soldiers came to shoot the flocks of crows that visited the zoo, Antonina would go out afterward and gather the crows to cook them for the many people at the villa. She passed them off as pheasant.

Sometimes groups of Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts passed through the zoo. Youth groups had been outlawed by the Nazis, but they helped the Home Army in various ways. Rys often overheard the scouts whispering and was frustrated that he could not join them. He was warned never to talk about the Guests to anyone. As a result, he grew more anxious every day. He stopped making friends for fear of slipping. Instead, he spent all of his time with Morys the pig. One night, German soldiers saw Rys and Morys together and took Morys away to be butchered. Rys cried for days and refused to go into the garden.

Chapter 15: The pigs at the zoo started to die because the Germans refused to give Jan the money to purchase straw to keep the pigs warm in the winter. Jan later learned that the director of the slaughterhouses had planned to rent the zoo out to a German company that grew herbal plants.

The plants and trees at the zoo were torn out because the Nazis wanted the Slav plants replaced with German ones. This was part of the plan to wipe Polish genes from the earth. Shortly afterward, the German president of Warsaw came to the zoo with his wife and daughter and asked Jan for a tour. The president loved zoos and was appalled by the decimation of the landscape. He ordered Jan to come to his office the next day to meet with the Polish vice president. The vice president did not know about the plan to rent the zoo to the herbal company and the president canceled the plan. The vice president suggested the zoo be used as a vegetable garden to feed the locals and help the Nazis to look like compassionate leaders. The president approved the change.

The Zabinksis were friends with Dr. Szymon Tenenbaum, an entomologist, and his wife Lonia, a dentist. Szymon and Lonia were confined to the Ghetto, but Szymon continued his work with insects. His collection was stored at the zoo.





One morning a German man came to the villa. As he approached the door, Antonina played Offenbach's "Go, go, go to Crete" on the piano to alert Guests. The man's name was Ziegler and he asked to see Szymon's insect collection. Ziegler's wonder at the collection eased Antonina's fears about his motives for visiting. Ziegler told Jan that Szymon wanted him to visit and that he might be able to help him get into the Ghetto. Jan showed Ziegler that he had a pass to go into the Ghetto, so implied he only needed a ride to get there.

Ziegler's office building was situated so that the front door was on the Aryan side of the wall and the back door opened into the Ghetto. When Jan and Ziegler arrived at Ziegler's office, Jan made a show of thanking Ziegler. Ziegler told the guard to allow Jan to enter whenever he wanted to. Jan drew attention to himself by acting loud and important whenever he returned to Ziegler's office so that the guards recognized him as Ziegler's friend, making it easy for him to come and go. He used his recognition to take Jews out of the Ghetto, showing his own pass as the escapee's.

One day Ziegler brought Szymon's dog with him and asked the Zabinskis to keep the dog because it would be happier at the zoo. Later, Ziegler returned to report that Szymon had died from a burst ulcer. Antonina worried that Lonia could survive in the Ghetto without Szymon.

## Analysis

This section begins with Ackerman using the animal motif to help explain some aspects of the Nazi agenda. When Lutz Heck is introduced, Ackerman explains that he was working toward recreating certain species of extinct animals. His interest is similar to the idea the Nazi's had of creating a race of "pure" men, the Aryans. Ackerman uses the discussion of back breeding in animals as a means of making the Nazi agenda easier to grasp. Many readers can relate to the idea of breeding animals for certain characteristics, but the idea of doing so in human beings is harder to grasp because it is deplorable. By presenting the idea through the animal motif, Ackerman provides a frame of reference for her readers.

Ackerman also uses the animal motif to indicate the time of year in which the action occurred and to describe the change in the zoo after the initial attack on Warsaw. She talks about how the zoo should have been entering a time of hibernation, which indicates the action took place in the autumn. However, the silence in the zoo was not the natural silence of hibernation, but an unnatural silence caused by the war. Ackerman writes that Antonina wondered if the war might be a sort of hibernation for people, which shows that Antonina related to the world through her experience with animals. The idea of the war being a hibernation also indicates that Antonina kept hope that the zoo and the city would eventually wake again as animals do in the spring.

The use of codenames by the Underground was introduced in the previous section, but in this section, the Zabinskis begin using codenames at the zoo. In fact, the zoo itself is given a codename – The House Under the Crazy Star. The name is appropriate



because even with most of the zoo animals gone, the villa was still a place filled with unconventional people and animals. The name seems more like an affectionate nickname than a codename, indicating that the people in the Underground were aware of the atmosphere that Antonina tried to maintain at the villa.

Another use of codenames is the use of the term “Guests” for the people hiding at the zoo. The word may not have been an official codename, and it is not clear if Antonina herself ever used the term, Ackerman’s use of a capital G each time she uses the term indicates that it is meant to be viewed as a codename to show the secrecy inherent in housing Jewish escapees. Capitalizing the word also helps clarify when Ackerman is writing about Jewish escapees or merely visitors, such as Jan’s mother.

With Jan’s increased involvement with the Underground, he was also given a codename. His codename was Francis, derived from Saint Francis of Assisi, who is the patron saint of animals. The choice of this codename again shows affection as well as a sense of humor.

Jan’s character is featured more heavily in this section of the book as the plot moves into the Zabinski’s involvement in the Underground. Jan was actively involved with the Underground, while Antonina played a supporting role to the Underground through caring for the Guests of the villa. Ackerman shows that Jan was a resourceful person by recounting some of the ways he used his connections to his advantage in rescuing people. When Jan needed to remain at the zoo in order to continue his work for the Underground, he devised a plan to raise pigs there for food for the Germans. It was Jan’s quick thinking that enabled the Underground to rescue several people from the Ghetto. Jan used his knowledge of human psychology, gleaned through his work in animal psychology, to manipulate the guard at Zeigler’s office into believing he was someone important that should be obeyed.

After telling the story of Jan’s entrance into the Ghetto through Zeigler, Ackerman writes about how small things, like an insect collection, can make a big difference. Though Ackerman makes this statement in connection with a specific incident, she also uses the idea in a larger way within the book as one might draw a parallel between the seeming insignificance of a bug collection and the seemingly insignificant zookeeper’s wife. In fact, Ackerman’s choice of title relegates Antonina to a lowly position; she is not the zookeeper or even Antonina, she is only the zookeeper’s wife. It is through her lowly status that Ackerman uses Antonina as a representative of the theme of courage in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Antonina did not know when Guests would arrive at the villa, but she did know that their presence could result in her death as well as the death of her family and friends. Yet, she welcomed each individual and cared for them as though they were family, which must have taken extraordinary courage. One example of her courage is in the way that Antonina integrated Wanda Englert into her home following her “disappearance.” Surely Antonina knew that Wanda could be recognized, but she still disguised her in a visible role as Rys’s tutor.

Ackerman continues to explore the theme of compassion through the goings on at the zoo. The people of Warsaw proved to be compassionate in the way that they supported



Jan's efforts by donating scraps to feed the pigs. It is probable that many of them knew the importance of keeping Jan at the zoo so that he could continue working with the Underground, but even if they did, they still showed compassion in that their efforts were helping Jews to escape. Antonina, too, used the pig farm as a means of dispensing her form of compassion through food packets she sent into the Ghetto with Jan. Her small act of sharing food may have been the difference between life and death for some of the starving people within the Ghetto. Though Jan was a stoic figure, his compassion often manifested itself through animals. In this section, he brings an orphaned piglet home for Rys to care for. The piglet was an animal destined to be food, but Jan saw it as a baby that needed help and he also probably knew that having a new animal to focus on would help his son to cope with the war.

Ackerman also explores the theme of compassion through the Nazi's false shows of compassion to appear as benevolent rulers. When Jan met with the vice president regarding the decimation of the zoo, the vice president suggested that the zoo be used to grow vegetables for the people of Warsaw. Since the vice president was Polish, he probably made the suggestion to help his people, but he sold the idea to the Germans by saying that it would help them appear more compassionate. By telling of this incident, Ackerman sets their false compassion for nefarious reason up against the true compassion of the people of Warsaw who were doing their best to care for one another while under German rule.

Ackerman again shows a glimpse of compassion through the Germans. Zeigler brought Szymon's dachshund to live at the villa because he believed that the dog would be happier there than in the Ghetto. His care for the animal is ironic since he was worried about a dog living in the confinement of the Ghetto, but he seemed unconcerned about the fate of the Jews forced to live there, except perhaps for Szymon whom he apparently considered a friend.

The theme of home is represented through the changes in the villa after the bombing. The image of what makes an ideal home is deconstructed when the bombs ruin the beautiful setting and take away the Zabinski's Eden. The zoo becomes unnaturally quiet and the sunlight that once streamed in the windows is gone because the windows are covered for blackout conditions. This changed caused Antonina to reexamine what made their villa a home. She wondered how she could continue to cultivate a home filled with "a spirit of affection and humor" when the zoo and the city around it were in such a state of disarray (101). Antonina's image of home is rebuilt around simpler things, like watching Rys play outside with the pig. Even the monotony of chores helped to reinforce that the villa could still be a home since they offered a sense of normalcy and a break from worrying about the war.

Ackerman returns to music as an important part of Antonina's life when she explains the playing of "Go, go, go to Crete!" as a signal to Guests. The song choice shows that Antonina was educated in music since it is a song from an opera that she clearly understood. The song was from a witty opera scene in which Helen of Troy and her lover Paris are trying to run away to a better place. This, of course, was also the case



for the Jews hiding in the villa. Antonina also chose a song written by a Jewish composer, so her choice also shows her resistance of German oppression.

## Vocabulary

distinguished, domesticity, specimens, conceited, cordial, hominids, inevitable, upheaval, metaphor, retain, contempt, stigmatized, prevail, predominantly, confiscated, audacity, amphibious, visceral, liaised, pantomime



# Chapters 16 - 23

## Summary

Chapter 16: Because Jan had spent years studying the behavior of animals, it was easy for him to change his persona when necessary. Guests also needed to be constantly aware and try to make things at the villa look normal. Jan always had a well-thought out plan in place and was strict about plans being followed.

Jan made a plan for Lonia to join them after Szymon's death. When he went to the Ghetto to get her, the guard who met them at the door on the way out was not the person Jan was expecting, but the guard's wife. She was uncertain about letting them through. Jan used the same arrogant persona he used with the guard to convince her. Lonia stayed at the village for a few weeks and then moved to a safer place. Jan moved Szymon's insect collection to the Natural History Museum to keep it safe. After the war, Lonia donated the collection to the State Zoological Museum, where it is still housed today.

Chapter 17: The Third Reich was obsessed with pest control. They were especially concerned with lice, which were responsible for spreading many diseases. The Ghetto was very susceptible to disease because of the close quarters. The Nazis used the sickness in the Ghetto to portray the Jews as "virulent" and "lice-ridden" (154). They likened ridding the world of Jews to delousing. After the Jews, Gypsies, and Slavs were recategorized as non-human, the Nazis organized shooting parties to kill them as a training exercise for the Nazi elite. Nazi posters depicted Jews as having faces like rats.

Many Jews escaped the Ghetto with help from friends on the Aryan side, but some stayed on. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira was a Hasidic rabbi who stayed to minister to the Ghetto. Rabbi Shapira provided the Ghetto with spiritual counseling as well as help with everyday concerns, like food. He taught himself and others to spend time in meditation communing with nature so that the brain was fed something other than pain and suffering.

Chapter 18: Fall arrived and birds began to migrate, some avoiding the war zones. The Guests moved to the warmer rooms of the villa. The Zabinskis had very little coal to get them through the winter and were able to warm only the dining room. The kitchen was icy cold so that Antonina's hands chapped and bled from washing dishes and preparing meals. Rys attended Underground school. Jan worked downtown in a job that allowed him to access all parts of the city legally. The Guests who had been staying in the animal cages were moved to winter safe houses because the Zabinskis did not have enough fuel to heat the cages.

A rabbit named Wicek came to live in the villa because the hutch was too cold for him in the winter. Wicek had an unusual personality and sometimes stole and ate meat. A male chicken was also brought into the villa because it was ill. Rys named it Kuba and made



it his pet. The Zabinskis were zookeepers by nature and needed to be among animals. This also allowed Jan to continue studying animal psychology. The animals had the added benefit of distracting Rys from the war. Antonina was determined to keep happiness in the household through play, animals, music, and curiosity. She used the animals to bring people together and give them something else to focus on.

Irene Sendler was one of the contacts that sent Guests to the zoo. She was an employee at the Social Welfare Department and used her job to create false documents and create a station in the Ghetto supposedly for handling infectious diseases. She used the station to smuggle in food and medicine and to smuggle children out. After being captured and tortured, Irene escaped and became a Guest at the zoo.

In the spring of 1942, more Guests began arriving. Antonina was worried about Magdalena Gross because she knew that the war made it nearly impossible for Magdalena to continue with the art that was so important to her life.

Magdalena had refused to move into the Ghetto, so she lived her life in disguise as an Aryan. These people in disguise were known as cats, and when their hiding places were found, they were described as having been burnt. Magdalena worked at a bakery and sometimes went to a cat-friendly café to socialize with other Jews in hiding. However, because she was famous, there was always the chance she would be recognized.

Chapter 19: Antonina heard Rys talking to “Starling” and thought he had made friends with a starling, one of her favorite birds. Rys was actually talking to Magdalena whose codename was “Starling.” She had come to live at the villa out of fear of being recognized in the outside world. She helped Antonina in the kitchen, which Antonina hated because she felt a famous artist should not have to do such things. She had to hide whenever a visitor came to the villa, which she found amusing because Antonina would alert her by playing the piano or singing. She wondered how she would feel about music after the war.

Chapter 20: Antonina was struck with a painful leg condition that left her bedridden for nearly a year, during which she was also pregnant. Guests, friends, and family came to her room to visit with her.

The Polish Underground received a letter in code in June of 1942 alerting them to an extermination camp at Treblinka. The Nazis began taking people out of the Ghetto to Treblinka by train.

Pediatrician Henryk Goldszmit, whose penname was Janusz Korczak, stayed in the Ghetto to start an orphanage. Hearing the children complain about their ills like elderly people bothered him, so he tried to keep things upbeat by encouraging the children to give thanks for little things like flowers and glow worms. He also taught them to be mindful about how they did their chores to redirect their minds from the war. He encouraged the children to play silly games and engage in putting on stage dramas. When the children were put on the train to Treblinka, Korczak travelled with them to keep them calm. As they went to their death, Korczak held hands with the children and



none of them wept. Korczak is claimed as a martyr by the Poles and as one of the Thirty-Six Just Men by the Israelis.

Chapter 21: The Ghetto was transformed into a labor camp after most of the Jews were taken to Treblinka. There were still a number of Jews in hiding, staying out of sight by traveling through tunnels. Zegota, a cell formed to aid Jews hidden in Polish homes, was formed. Members of Zegota included people with connections, such as Zofia Kossak, an author and member of the upper class, and Krahelska-Filipowicz, the former wife of an ambassador to the United States who had many military and political connections. Zegota did not engage in sabotage, but sought only to rescue Jews. Zegota provided money and false documents to the Zabinskis.

Marceli Lemi-Lebkowski, his wife, and two daughters arrived at the zoo with false documents. They pretended to be refugees from the east and paid rent for two rooms. The rent money purchased fuel for the bedrooms upstairs and allowed more Guests to stay at the villa. Many more Guests arriving at the zoo meant added chores for Antonina, but also more helpers, including the Lemi-Lebkowski girls whom she taught to do housework.

The Nazis built a fur farm on the zoo grounds. They hired a Polish man named Witold Wroblewski, whom everyone called "Fox Man." He was a Polish man who had been raised in Germany and sympathized with the Zabinskis. Fox Man moved into the villa with his cat and parakeets. Though the cat was an avid hunter and preferred live food, she never hunted any of the animals kept at the villa, with the exception of a baby muskrat named Szczurcio that she became obsessed with. Szczurcio was kept in a cage, but he eventually learned to escape. Szczurcio escaped one day and climbed into the chimney of the kitchen stove. When the story was told at dinner time, a little girl laughed so hard that she tripped and spilled soup on Fox Man's head. He rushed into his room and let the parakeets eat the noodles from his hair so as not to waste the food.

Chapter 22: There was a nightly curfew by which everyone was supposed to be back in their homes or risk being beaten or killed. Antonina let Rys stay up and wait for everyone to arrive back at the villa since he worried about people missing curfew, especially Jan.

One night Jan brought Rys a hamster. He explained that the hamster's mother had killed all the other hamsters in his litter. Antonina and Jan struggled with how much to tell Rys about the cruelties of war, but they thought it was important to teach him about the ways of animals, even when they were unexplainably cruel. Jan explained to Rys that the hamster was not hibernating like it would in the wild because animals behave differently in captivity. The arrival of the hamster ushered in a new era that Antonina called the "Hamster Era" (200).

Chapter 23: As of the beginning of 1943, Antonina was still confined to her bed. Himmler ordered the "resettlement" of 8,000 more Jews, which meant they were to be put to death. The Zabinskis received a phone call from a friend named Maurycy Fraenkel who was a lawyer living in the Ghetto. He asked to come to the zoo. He arrived in poor



physical condition and knowing that his presence could pose a threat to the villa. As Maurycy grew used to living at the villa, his condition improved and he proved to be a kind and gentle man. However, he had difficulty speaking because of the losses he had suffered. He spent a great deal of time sitting beside Antonina's bed. Maurycy was especially bothered by the idea that if the Zabinskis were found to be harboring Jews, they would be killed.

Fox Man asked Maurycy to help him with the paperwork for his fur business, which enabled him to take on the identity of an employee of the fur farm. Afterward, he was able to join the household as a lodger at the villa and did not have to hide during the day.

The German Sixth Army was defeated at Stalingrad. That led to many Jews working in Berlin being sent to Auschwitz. The first armed resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto started and many more Guests arrived at the zoo. Jan and Antonina both kept cyanide pills with them in case they were captured. Antonina tried to keep the atmosphere of the villa as pleasant and joy-filled as possible.

Maurycy became friends with the hamster and the hamster stayed in his room. He renamed the hamster Piotr because his own new name was Pawel, so that they were Peter and Paul, like the disciples. The two were inseparable and referred to as "the Hamsters."

## Analysis

This section of the book explores the theme of family, and what makes a family, by drawing together some of the people and animals who became part of the villa family. Ackerman writes in detail about the animals who come to live at the villa, which suggests that Antonina devoted much of her diary writings to the animals that she loved. The attention paid to the animals by both the author and Antonina indicates that the animals were a part of the family. The use of the animals to strengthen the theme of family is part of the animal motif that Ackerman uses to frame the story.

One of the animal family members was Wicek the rabbit. Ackerman describes the rabbit's odd personality, which brings a sense of lightness to the book and temporarily draws the reader's attention away from the darker subject matter of the war. Not only does this add an element of interest to the book, it also has the same effect of taking attention away from the war that the rabbit had for the family in the villa. His antics gave them something positive to focus on. Antonina also drew parallels between Wicek's strange and erratic behavior and the behavior of human beings saying that "wherever she turned in the human or animal world, she found 'shocking and unpredictable behavior'" (164). While the reader might initially take this comment as a reference to the behavior of the Nazis, it can also be applied to the people of Warsaw since the ways in which they came together and took risks to help people can also be considered shocking and unpredictable. In this way, Wicek's story is part of the theme of the





incredible courage of people who had very little power at the time. Wicek, a member of a species that is normally timid, acted boldly to get the things he wanted.

Ackerman also introduces Szczurio the muskrat, Kuba the chicken, and Piotr the hamster. These animals, too, are members of the family, but are also used to tell a bigger story. Recounting Szczurio's escape allows Ackerman to add to the theme of home in that she uses the story to show that the people in the villa enjoyed moments of fun and humor. Ackerman writes, "One of the most remarkable things about Antonina was her determination to include play, animals, wonder, curiosity, marvel, and a wide blaze of innocence" in her house (166). These, apparently, were the things that made the villa a home to Antonina. Kuba the chicken was Rys's pet and provided him with a distraction from the war, giving him something to love and care for.

Piotr the hamster plays a role in developing the theme of compassion since he was one of the factors that helped heal Maurycy and enabled him to communicate with others again. The fact that Piotr was initially a gift to Rys, but ended up living in Maurycy's room when the man took a liking to him shows that Rys was a boy capable of great compassion toward other people since he must have given the hamster to Maurycy.

Ackerman also uses Piotr to illustrate a point about human behavior. Jan told Rys that the hamster was an orphan because its mother had killed all of the other hamsters in the litter. The Zabinskis did not tell their son details about the war and what the Germans were doing, but they taught him about cruelty in the world through animal behavior. Ackerman's inclusion of this story suggests that the reader is to take away a lesson about human behavior, perhaps that humans do things that are terribly cruel and make no sense just as animals sometimes do and there's really no way to explain it. Jan also told Rys that the hamster was not hibernating because it was in captivity and animals in captivity act differently than those in their natural habitats. Again, Ackerman seems to be suggesting that there is something to be learned about people from the hamster's behavior. In this case, readers can draw a correlation between the captive hamster and the captive Jews in the Ghetto.

Maurycy's story touches on three of the major themes: compassion, courage, and family. Maurycy was taken in at the villa when he called to ask if he could come under threat of being part of the "resettlement." Because the Zabinskis were compassionate people, they did not turn him away, but made room for him in their home. Maurycy knew that his presence at the villa put the Zabinskis in danger, and the Zabinskis knew that as well, but they were courageous people who took the risks that came with harboring Jews. Maurycy arrived at the villa in poor physical and mental condition. Because the people at the villa took him in as part of their family, Maurycy recovered. Part of Maurycy's recovery can be attributed to Fox Man since he gave Maurycy a sense of purpose and an identity by asking him to handle the bookkeeping for the fur farm. Fox Man may have genuinely needed someone to help him, but it is more likely that he offered Maurycy the job knowing that it would help Maurycy more. When Maurycy's name was changed to Pawel for his false documents, he named the hamster Piotr so that they could be like the disciples Peter and Paul. The function of Jesus' disciples was



to spread his teachings, so perhaps Maurycy was naming himself a disciple of the teachings of compassion and family that he learned from the Zabinskis.

Ackerman underscores the idea that the people gathered in the villa were indeed a family regardless of whether or not they were related by blood when she writes about Antonina's illness. Antonina wrote in her diary that she was thankful for the way that the Guests took care of her while she was bedridden, saying that they spoiled her in a way that no one ever had. Antonina was orphaned as a young girl and her grandmother sent her away to school, so Antonina had not had a family to spoil her as a child. Ackerman writes that expressing her gratitude in this manner was as close as Antonina ever got to mentioning that she was an orphan. Therefore, what Antonina wrote in her diary about being spoiled can be seen as her feeling that the people in the villa were her family.

Magdalena Gross reappears in this part of the book. She came to be at the villa when it was too dangerous for her to live as a cat because of her recognizable face. Her cryptonym of "Starling" is another example of the way cryptonyms said something about the people who gave them as well as the people they were given to. Starlings were Antonina's favorite birds, so she gave the cryptonym to one of her favorite friends. Antonina thought that starlings were "charming" and she pictured Magdalena moving from one place to another to avoid being caught like a starling going from one nest to another. Ackerman uses Magdalena's reintroduction as a means of talking about how war can affect people. Magdalena found Antonina's musical signal that sent her to a hiding spot in the villa amusing, but wondered what she would think of music after the war. Ackerman suggests that even something as enjoyable as music can turn into a symbol of fear when a person associates it with a traumatic event.

Ackerman includes stories of individuals affected by the war, some of whom had no connection to the zoo, in order to further communicate the devastating effects of the war. Because the Nazis primarily targeted the Jews, Ackerman shares the story of Rabbi Shapira to discuss the loss of 90 percent of the Jewish Orthodox community during World War II. Rabbi Shapira's story also reinforces Antonina's belief that the connection between people and animals or nature is important to good health and happiness. Rabbi Shapira taught that meditation and communing with nature would help the Jewish people suffering in the Ghetto. He felt that nature gave people something to focus on other than the war, which is the same idea that Antonina followed by bringing animals into the villa for her family and Guests to enjoy.

Perhaps the most poignant story that Ackerman shares is the story of pediatrician and author Janusz Korczak. His orphanage was a mini-society where he treated the children with respect. The children created their own newspaper and were able to take one another to "court" for perceived wrongs. His story is a strong example of the theme of compassion since he gave his own life out of concern for the children he cared for. Korczak knew that being sent to Treblinka meant they would be executed, but he willingly travelled with the children because he knew his presence would lessen their fear. Ackerman includes a famous quote from Korczak that exemplifies the theme of compassion that she writes about: "You do not leave a sick child in the night, and you do not leave children at a time like this" (185).

## Vocabulary

interrogators, hubbub, reside, infatuation, virulent, principle, veered, lineage, thug, vigorous, sensory, agonizing, warmongering, transcend, salvaged, inseparable, detainees, incoherent, amoral, coherence



# Chapters 24 - 30

## Summary

Chapter 24: Himmler wanted to give Hitler a birthday gift in the spring of 1943 that would gain him favor. He wanted to exterminate all of the Jews remaining in Warsaw's Ghetto. When the Germans arrived at the Ghetto, the Jews had constructed barricades and were armed. There was a siege that lasted a month until the Germans finally decided to burn everything down. When the Ghetto was burned, ash fell like rain on the zoo.

One night Rys announced that the Sables had arrived. Fox Man was confused since the fur farm did not raise sables. The Sables were Regina and Samuel Kenigswein and their two boys. Regina was also pregnant. They had escaped the Ghetto with the boys sedated and carried in sacks. At first, Antonina was concerned about where they would put the Kenigswein's, but she could not bring herself to turn them away. The boys proved to be skilled at remaining quiet when the housekeeper was around and Antonina learned they had gone to a special Ghetto school that had taught them how to be quiet.

The Zabinskis could not trust their housekeeper not to talk about the extra food that was always needed. They sometimes heard her muttering about how much food the family ate. Rys would sneak extra plates of food to feed to the Guests when his parents would instruct him to feed the animals. The Zabinskis fired the housekeeper and replaced her with a trusted friend.

Chapter 25: The Kenigsweins were moved to the home of Feliks Cywinski who worked with Jan in the Underground. Once a month Cywinski would send those hiding at his home to the zoo or elsewhere so he could invite neighbors and friends over. This showed people that he had nothing to hide. When Cywinski ran out of money, he went into debt and sold his house to rent apartments to hide Jews.

To move the Kenigsweins, Antonina decided to bleach their black hair to make them less conspicuous. They ended up with red hair, earning them the codename "Squirrels." Regina had her baby while staying with Cywinski and he considered it one of his happiest days.

Other rescuers were also using tricks to hide the features of Jews. One couple, Mr. and Mrs. Walters, gave lessons to Jewish women on how to look and act Aryan. Some surgeons were even helping by reshaping Jewish noses and restoring foreskins on Jewish men. Mrs. Walters described her actions as a kind of "voodoo of compassion" wherein she could not stop herself from helping in the face of so much suffering (222).

Chapter 26: Spring arrived and Antonina was still bedridden. Older children who were involved in youth groups that aided the Underground randomly appeared at the zoo and stayed in the Pheasant House for a few nights. Rys delivered meals to them. Antonina



wondered what Rys thought of what the youth were doing so she asked him. He responded that he was a man, so he naturally knew what they were doing and that he did not care because he had his own friend now.

Antonina discovered that his new friend was Jerzyk Topo, the son of a family living in one of the staff apartments. One day Jerzyk's mother came to the zoo and informed Antonina that the boys were planning to bomb a haystack near the German weapons storehouse and put up an anti-German flag at the zoo entrance. Antonina told Jan about Rys's plan. He talked to Rys as though he were a young soldier and Jan was his commanding officer.

Chapter 27: Antonina was finally able to get out of bed in the spring of 1943. She loved spring because of the animal noises it brought with it. She was weak and walked with a cane. She was annoyed by the help she needed and her inability to perform household chores.

Jan continued to leave the villa early each morning. He ruled over the villa and did not tolerate disobedience. At times, he was harsh and sometimes too hard on Antonina because of the stress he was under. The Guests became angry with Jan and refused to talk to him because of the way he treated Antonina.

One day there was a fire in the German's storage area at the zoo. Antonina ran outside to check on the zoo buildings and a soldier accused her of starting it. She spoke to him calmly and convinced him the fire had probably been started by the cigarette of a German soldier. Jan praised her in front of the Guests for her quick thinking and her ability to calm people like she had been able to calm difficult animals. After praising Antonina, Jan went on to say that the Germans had accepted her explanation because it was convenient and meant they did not have to investigate further. That night, Antonina lay in bed and thought about the psychic connection she had with animals. She wondered how animals could suppress their predatory ways in just a few months, but humans can quickly become savage even though they have had centuries to refine their actions.

Chapter 28: Jan and Antonina learned that one of their Polish zoo guards had seen Magdalena and told someone about the famous woman. Antonina worried that the wrong person might hear about Magdalena and cause trouble. Warsaw had become a hotbed of blackmail and the city was "crowded with predators and prey of all sizes" (240). Antonina and Jan decided to hide the Guests somewhere else for a while. Magdalena and Maurycy went to a friend who had taught with Jan before the war, but she sent them back shortly after because she thought someone was watching them. Antonina thought the woman might just be reacting out of fear. She had the same fearful feelings, but knew that she had to appear calm for the sake of others.

The Zabinskis learned that Janina Buchholtz, an old friend, was a key member of Zegota. Janina worked in the registry office, so she was able to create false identities and the records to make them credible. Working with Janina allowed Jan to increase his efforts for the Underground.



Magdalena was sent to live with a friend of Janina's in Saska Kepa. Maurycy remained at the villa. Both he and Antonina were sad to see Magdalena go.

When things felt safe again, Jan and Antonina began taking in more Guests. Aniela Dobrucka was one of the new Guests. She had worked with a historian in the Ghetto who felt that an archive needed to be created to preserve the facts surrounding the war. The historical documents were hidden in milk churns and all but one was found after the war.

Aniela brought her friend Genia to the villa. Genia had been involved in organizing secret schools in the Ghetto. She had been captured and put on a train to Treblinka, but had jumped off and escaped. Genia looked Aryan, so she hid by acting as Antonina's tailor.

Chapter 29: Antonina and the Guests were listening to Fox Man play the piano when they heard some rustling. Jan went to investigate and returned asking for the key to the Pheasant House. Two boys who were part of the Underground's sabotage group had been sent to the zoo to hide after setting fire to German gas tanks. The next morning Rys took Wicek with him to the Pheasant House where he found they boys surrounded by rabbits. He brought them food and introduced himself when they woke. Antonina reminded Rys that their hiding at the zoo was a secret that he must not share with anyone. Rys snapped at her and said he understood better than she did because she was a woman.

Chapter 30: Summer came and Rys waited in his bed at night for Jan to come home. Wicek and Kuba sat with him while he waited. Jan sometimes came with food, a good story, or another animal. The two animals would then follow Jan to the dining room to sit with him.

The winter of 1943 was exceptionally cold. Rys caught pneumonia and was in the hospital for several weeks. When he returned home in the spring he helped plant the garden with Wicek and Kuba following him. Antonina noticed that the chickens in the coop treated Kuba like an outsider and pecked him if he came near. Wicek, though, let the chicken ride on his back.

Danglu Leist, the German president, decided Warsaw should have a zoo again. He asked Jan to submit a budget for the zoo. Jan believed his Underground work would be helped by a busy zoo. Jan re-thought the idea of a new zoo and realized that it might not be the right thing for the city and could pose a drain on the economy. He explained this to vice president Kulski, who was Polish, and then wrote a letter to Leist requesting an enormous budget. Leist did not respond.

The director of Parks and Gardens was threatened by the proposed revitalization of the zoo and requested that Jan's job be terminated. Kulski changed the complaint before the Germans saw it and had Jan transferred to the Pedagogic Museum. His new job left him with more time to work with the Underground. Antonina worried everyday about



Jan's safety. She knew little about his activities, but did not want to know more because knowing would only escalate her fears.

One day the governor's office called and summoned Jan. Everyone thought he would be arrested and urged him to run, but he refused. Before he left the next morning, Antonina asked if he had his cyanide pill. When he returned home, he was smiling. He had been summoned to get rid of snakes at the governor's private residence.

Antonina had a baby girl named Teresa in June. People sent gifts for the baby to the villa and Antonina saw all of them as treasures in a time when people had little to share. The baby seemed a good omen when people were trying not to have babies because of the war. The villa had a christening party for Teresa and celebrated with a feast of meat preserves and waffles made by Fox Man. Maurycy brought his hamster to the table. The hamster licked honeyed liquor from a glass until he was drunk. He died that night.

## Analysis

This section of the book shows the effect the war had on Rys. At the start of the book, he was a normal little boy. However, Rys started to lash out at his mother by saying he knew things that she did not because she was a woman. Rys's words reflect the station of women at the time since wives were generally expected to defer to men. Rys probably felt like he had little control over his life because of the chaos of the war, so he tried to exert control over his mother by trying to make her feel like she was beneath him. Rys's actions were those of an older person. The war forced him to grow up much more quickly than he would have otherwise. Rys was charged with keeping secrets that he knew could mean the death of his parents and himself if he had revealed them to the wrong person. When Antonina reminded him of the importance of keeping those secrets, he reacted by acting as though he was too old to need such a reminder. Rys was clearly worried not just about being able to keep secrets, but also about the welfare of his family. Rys was unable to sleep at night until everyone returned to the villa at curfew time, especially Jan.

Rys's behavior got more extreme when he plotted with his friend to bomb a haystack. His plan plays into the theme of courage shown by people in weak places since he is only a child. Rys probably knew some of what his father was involved in and, like many young boys, he wanted to be like his father. Though there were many youth working with the Underground, Rys was still too young to do so. His interaction with the youths who stayed in the Pheasant House likely spurred his desire to take a more active part in the Underground. Jan seemed to know what Rys was going through and his need to be treated like an adult, so he related to Rys as a military officer might relate to a soldier. His talk with Rys apparently worked since there were no other incidents of this nature mentioned.

Jan was also emotionally affected by the war and his work with the Underground. Ackerman wrote about the way he started to speak harshly to Antonina and was difficult to be around because of his attitude. Living under the constant stress that he did, and



knowing that he was also putting his family in danger, must have taken an emotional toll on Jan. The way the Guests reacted to Jan's attitude is an example of the theme of family. The Guests loved Antonina and could not bear to see her treated so poorly when she was under a lot of stress herself. However, they knew they owed Jan a debt of gratitude and loved him as well, so they could not directly confront him about his behavior. Instead, they gave Jan the silent treatment until he realized that they were angry about the way he was treating Antonina.

The author uses Antonina to explore the theme of courage in this section when she was confronted by a German soldier who accused her of setting a fire. This example of the theme is strengthened by the animal motif since Antonina used her unique way with animals to calm the angry soldier. Antonina used her quick thinking and her ability to remain calm under pressure to relax the soldier. Perhaps Antonina's reaction was just in her nature, but it seems probable that she knew what she was doing and intentionally treated the soldier like a difficult animal since she later reflected on her connection with animals and the lack of progress in the field of animal psychology. Regardless of whether or not Antonina consciously used her knowledge of animal behavior during the encounter, standing her ground with an angry and armed soldier took courage.

Ackerman again uses Antonina to discuss the theme of courage when Magdalena and Maurycy were sent away and then returned because the woman they were staying with was frightened of being watched. Antonina did not believe anyone was watching the woman's house, but that the woman was simply reacting out of fear. Antonina was also afraid, yet she overcame her fears to rescue Jews.

Jan's actions also strengthen the theme of courage since he took enormous risks and was always in danger of being caught. His courage was evident when he was summoned to the governor's house. The fact that Jan and Antonina both carried cyanide pills with them is a testament to their courage. Jan refused to run even though his family encouraged him to. Instead, he faced his fear and met with the governor. If he had not, he would have been unable to continue working with the Underground.

Ackerman uses several people to discuss the theme of compassion. Antonina, of course, is one of those people. When the Kenigsweins had nowhere else to go but the villa. The fact that Antonina hesitated for just a moment before taking them in shows the depths of her compassion. She was not sure where she would put them or if she could care for still more people, but she was unable to turn them away.

Cywinski is another example of compassion. He wanted to help the Jews so much that he went into debt and sold his own house to buy apartments for rescuing Jews. His sacrifice of his own comfort for the sake of those he rescued shows a great deal of compassion.

Jan's refusal of a new zoo was also an act of compassion, not for the Jews, but for all of the people of Warsaw. Jan certainly wanted to rebuild the zoo and he knew he needed to stay at the zoo to help the Underground, but he also knew that at that time a zoo was





not in the best interest of the city because of the financial drain it would create. His plan to submit a budget that he knew would be rejected shows his intelligence.

Ackerman uses the animal motif to demonstrate ideas about human behavior. She writes about the relationship between Wicek and Kuba. Kuba was an outcast among the other chickens, but Wicek accepted him and even allowed the chicken to sit on his back. Once again, Ackerman seems to include the story of these two animals so that the reader draws conclusions about human behavior from the animals. In this case, Kuba is meant to represent the Jews, who are outcasts in the eyes of the Germans. Wicek represents the Polish people who helped the Jews. The message is that people can get along regardless of their differences.

The death of Piotr the hamster is also an example of an idea presented through the animal motif. Piotr licked sweet liquor from a glass at a party for Theresa's christening and died that night. His death occurred on a night when the villa family was relaxed and happy. They forgot about the war for a while and enjoyed a night of celebration. Piotr's death comes right before the climax of the book in which the war escalates because of the Uprising and everyone is forced to leave the villa. Ackerman uses Piotr's death to foreshadow worse things to come.

The births of two babies in this section provide hope for the future of the Zabinskis and the Jews. Ackerman writes that Antonina saw her baby as a symbol of hope because she was born healthy in a time when people were trying not to have babies. Cywinski echoed Antonina's feelings when he later told reporters that the birth of Regina's baby was his "happiest moment" (220).

## Vocabulary

liquidate, swanky, claret, diluted, clandestine, influx, gouged, fabricated, concocted, yammering, memoirs, volatile, rife, assailed, devotee, immersed, aviary, contemptuously, luxuriant, arboretum



# Chapters 31 - 36

## Summary

Chapter 31: A bomb exploded at Hitler's headquarters in the Prussian forest. When the Germans fled that area, they went through Warsaw and blew up buildings as they passed through. Jan was certain the Uprising would start soon. He was confident the Home Army could defeat the Germans within a few days.

Most of the villa's Guests left to join the army or to go somewhere safer. Fox Man and Maurycy left, but the lawyer's daughters decided to stay and help Antonina with the children and Jan's elderly mother. Jan was called to a battle and went to find out more about the Uprising. He returned later to say goodbye to his family. He gave Antonina a tin with a loaded revolver in it. Antonina realized that Jan was no longer confident in the Home Army. He told her that the timing was not right.

Antonina stood guard over the zoo and her family, not sleeping for 23 days. She and Rys stood on the terrace watching the fires across the river. Rys sometimes stood on the roof watching through binoculars. A soldier came to the villa and told Antonina that if he saw Rys on the roof again, he would shoot him.

Hitler ordered Himmler to send troops into Warsaw to kill every Pole and demolish the city one block at a time. On Black Saturday the soldiers attacked and killed 30,000 people. The Poles tried to fight back and begged the Russians for help.

Soldiers came to the villa and ordered Antonina, who was holding her baby, to put her hands up. They ordered Fox Man's 15-year-old helper to go behind the garden shed. As he walked away, a man shot. Then they ordered Rys to do the same, and again there was a shot. Antonina nearly fainted and a soldier told her to sit down. Then, one of the Germans told the boys to bring him a rooster. Rys and Fox Man's helper reappeared carrying Kuba, who was dead. The Germans considered the event a joke and laughed about it. Rys broke down in tears and Antonina praised him for being brave and asked for his help to return to the house. Later, Antonina wondered why the men had played the trick and what made them show her compassion when they asked her to sit.

The battle continued in the city. Antonina lay awake that night listening. Russian soldiers came to the zoo to scavenge. One of them approached Antonina and tried to take the gold medallion from around her neck. She knew little Russian, but managed to tell them they were not allowed, using the words "Your mother! Your wife! Your sister!" (282). The soldier's attitude immediately changed and he gave Antonina some candies, then ordered the other men to leave everything, threatening to kill them if they took even one thing.

German clerks came to the zoo to speak with Fox Man. They instructed him to take the animals and his employees to Germany. Everyone hoped that packing up so many



animals would take long enough for the Uprising to be over and the Germans to be gone.

The war raged on and the Germans dropped notes telling the Poles to leave the city before it was decimated. One day during a lull, the women of the villa lay down to rest. A soldier entered the kitchen and saw Antonina nursing the baby. He asked her to play the piano for him. She chose a love song and he demanded that she stop, which made her think that someone had broken his heart. He looked through her books and asked her to play "The Star-Spangled Banner." Then, he saluted her and left.

Chapter 32: The fighting moved closer to the zoo, so Antonina prepared to move her family and Fox Man prepared to take his animals and leave. Antonina had to decide which pets to take. In the end, they took only Wicek and freed the rest of the animals. On the morning they were to leave, Fox Man's cat emerged from the bushes. Rys picked her up, but she squirmed to get down, so the family was forced to leave her behind. Watching Rys with the cat, Antonina wished she could stay, too.

Antonina, her family, and Fox Man and his animals took a train. When they stopped in Lowicz to wait for additional animals for Fox Man to arrive, Antonina went looking for help. She talked to Andrzej Grabski, the son of the Polish ex-prime minister, who was on the fur company board. He helped her find a place to stay in town at a schoolhouse on an old estate.

When they arrived at the schoolhouse, it was dirty and all of the windowpanes were broken. It was silent there except for the sound of Wicek trying to get out of his cage. Rys found the silence spooky and went to Antonina for comfort. He believed they would never return home.

Antonina and Rys went in search of cleaning supplies. They met Mrs. Kokot, who was the schoolteacher. She told Antonina that her husband would come and put a good stove in the next day. Over the next few days, she provided food and a bathtub for the baby. Life got better, but Antonina worried about Rys because he had lost everything. However, Rys adjusted and became friends with the Kokot's sons and enjoyed learning how to make or fix things from Mr. Kokot. He eventually gave his new friends Wicek.

The Warsaw Uprising collapsed after two months of fighting. Refugees fled the city and entered the surrounding smaller towns. When the situation began to quiet, Antonina started looking for news of Jan. She did not know that Jan had been shot through the neck, but had miraculously survived. He was then shipped to a POW camp for officers. Nunia posted messages around Warsaw asking for information about Jan and providing Antonina's location. Antonina received letters with clues to Jan's whereabouts. When she learned he was in a POW camp, she and Nunia wrote letters to all of the camps.

Chapter 33: Christmastime arrived. Antonina remembered the elaborate Christmases they once had at the zoo. Rys went into the woods with his friends and they brought back small fir trees. Antonina placed their tree on a stool and they decorated it with



apples, cookies, candles, and some homemade ornaments. Genia risked arrest to visit and bring money, food, and messages.

One day Mrs. Kokot brought a letter to Antonina. The Warsaw Zoo's archive contains a postcard sent from a POW camp with a caricature of Jan drawn on it.

The Red Army finally entered Warsaw, but it was too late since the city had already surrendered.

Chapter 34: The Germans retreated and Antonina hoped Jan would be released. She had to leave the schoolhouse because school would be resuming, so they all returned to Warsaw. Antonina was shocked by the devastation of the city. At the zoo, they found that their house was still standing, though damaged. Antonina checked the garden and found one small strawberry plant, which she considered a sign of hope. Fox Man's cat emerged and ran to Rys's arms, but soon squirmed to get down and return to her home in the bushes. Antonina and Rys promised all of the broken things around them that they would soon return to help.

Chapter 35: Magdalena and Maurycy married while still in hiding. When they returned to Warsaw in 1945, Magdalena wanted to sculpt animals again, but there were none at the zoo yet. She sculpted the only thing available, a duckling.

Jan came home in the spring of 1946 and started zoo repairs in 1947. The zoo rebuilt with native species donated by the people of Warsaw. Some of the lost animals were found, including Badger. Magdalena created three animal sculptures, but died before she could complete her dream of creating large sculptures for the zoo. Two years after the zoo reopened in 1949, Jan retired from zookeeping. He went on to write 50 books about animals and conservation, participate in a radio broadcast on those topics, and work with the International Society for the Preservation of European Bison. Jan also had the responsibility of reactivating the European Bison Stud Book.

Antonina wrote children's books and raised her children. She also stayed in touch with their former Guests.

Samuel Kenigswein died of a heart attack in 1946, after which Regina and the children moved to Israel. Aniela also moved to Israel. Genia moved to London and then to New York City where she worked in the Yiddish Scientific Institute Library. Irena Sendler was captured and tortured, but escaped with help from the Underground. She worked in Poland as a social worker and advocated for people with disabilities. Adam Englert survived imprisonment and concentration camps. After the war, he and Wanda moved to London.

Rys became a civil engineer and lives in Warsaw. He is healthy, but a little wary. He remembers watching a bomb fall near the villa that would have killed him if it had exploded. He also remembers posing for Magdalena. Zoo life seemed normal to him because it was what he grew up knowing.

Teresa lives in Scandinavia.



The Berlin Zoo was also bombed during the war, so Lutz Heck faced some of the same challenges that the Zabinskis did in Warsaw. He wrote about the destruction of his zoo in his autobiography. He left Berlin as the Russians approached to avoid being arrested for looting zoos in the Ukraine.

Around 300 people passed through the Warsaw Zoo during the war. Jan always told people that Antonina was the real hero of their story.

Chapter 36, Part I: The author describes the Bialowiza forest in 2005. Wild horses graze and survive mostly without the intervention of humans, except in the winter when rangers provide hay and salt. There are also re-created aurochs and bison. Some of the trees are 500 years old and there are more than 12,000 species of animals living in the forest. The preserve is off limits to hunters, loggers, and motorized vehicles. Flocks of starlings fly about, reminding the author of Antonina and Magdalena.

Some people contend that the aurochs and tarpans are re-creations and not the real thing, possibly because of the Nazi involvement in their breeding. However, others argue that even if they are re-creations, they help preserve the natural environment and the aurochs might be used to strengthen the gene pool of the area's domestic cattle.

Chapter 36, Part II: Today's Warsaw is spacious and has many green spaces and trees. Where the Ghetto once stood is a park with chestnut trees and a monument. After communism was defeated in 1989, the Polish people turned old Gestapo buildings into offices that aid people, such as the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Justice. Old Town was rebuilt in a Gothic style. The author walked the streets where Antonina once walked. She saw a statue of a mermaid with a sword and thought Antonina would have appreciated it since it was half woman and half animal.

## Analysis

The beginning of this section is the climax of the book because the battle in Warsaw reached its peak when the Uprising began. Jan left to join the fight. The danger to the people at the villa was heightened and they were eventually forced to leave when the fighting got too close to the zoo. Ackerman communicates the added danger to Antonina and the people at the villa through increased encounters with soldiers. In one such incident, armed German soldiers threatened Antonina and her children, saying that they would pay for the Germans who died in the Uprising. The soldiers' behavior was sadistic and cruel, since they were only playing a joke on Antonina. However, Antonina took the outcome of the incident as a sign of hope because she saw a glimmer of compassion when they realized how badly they had frightened her and urged her to sit. Ackerman has indicated that Antonina was an optimistic person, and this incident is an example of her optimism. Rather than seeing the cruelty in the actions of the soldiers, Antonina chose to see the compassion and decided their compassion meant that "pure evil doesn't really exist" (281).



Ackerman includes another story involving Antonina and soldiers at the villa that reveals the capacity for compassion in most human beings. The villa was invaded by Russian soldiers who wanted to loot Antonina's home. Antonina again used her skill with difficult animals to defuse the situation. She spoke firmly to the soldier in the same way a trainer might issue a command to an animal, but in this case she used words to remind the man that she was a woman just like the women that might have been in his life, like his mother, sister, or daughter. The soldier's change in demeanor reveals that he probably did have women in his life that meant something to him and memories of them caused him to show compassion for Antonina.

A third incident in which Antonina was confronted by a soldier involved a soldier who wandered into the villa and wanted Antonina to play the piano for him. His anger at Antonina's initial choice of a love song made her think he must have had a broken heart. His odd choice of "The Star Spangled Banner" and his salute afterward were a mystery to Antonina, and Ackerman does not explain them either, leaving it up to readers to draw their own conclusions. Since the Americans were fighting against the Germans, it is probably that the soldier did not agree with the Nazi agenda, but had no choice but to follow orders.

Ackerman returns to the theme of what makes a home when Antonina and her children move into a schoolhouse to wait out the Uprising. A schoolhouse does not seem like a place that could ever feel like home to a family, yet Antonina did turn it into a home with some help from the Kokots. Though it might have made more sense for Antonina to leave all of the animals behind since traveling with pets would have been difficult, she brought Wicek along because she knew the importance of pets in their home. At the schoolhouse, Antonina almost immediately began cleaning and fixing up the building to give it more of a homey atmosphere. She also connected with the Kokots and became friends with them, because being surrounded by people was a part of what had made the villa a home.

Though the schoolhouse did become a temporary home, the villa remained the Zabinski's true home, so Antonina's return to it was inevitable. When they went back to the zoo after the fighting had ended, instead of being disheartened by the damage, Antonina was optimistic simply because the villa still stood. She also found a reason for hope when she found a small strawberry plant poking through the snow, showing signs of new life.

The move to the schoolhouse made a difference in Rys's attitude. His change was almost immediate upon their arrival at the schoolhouse when Antonina noticed that he seemed to need her comfort just as he once had before the war. He forged a friendship with the Mr. and Mrs. Kokot's sons. The friendship may have been his most meaningful friendship with children his age up to that point in his life since he cared so much for the boys that he gave them his beloved pet rabbit. Rys even took the initiative to decorate the schoolhouse for Christmas when he brought home a small tree and made ornaments for it.



Ackerman concludes the book by providing information about what happened to key people after the war. The fact that Antonina kept in touch with her former Guests following the war shows that she did consider them family, and Ackerman treats them as members of the villa family by wrapping up each person's story through a brief summary of their lives following the war. She goes into the most detail about Rys since he was one of the resources she used in researching the book. Her description of him as an elderly adult shows that the war did have a lasting effect on him. When Ackerman asked him questions about his mother, he seemed to find it difficult to talk about her and answered Ackerman's inquiries with one word responses. He never forgot seeing the bombs fall, but he also never forgot some of the happier times, like posing for Magdalena's sculptures.

Ackerman uses the final chapter to describe the Bialowiza Forest in the present time as well as the city of Warsaw. She writes about the forest because of the way it was impacted by the Nazi agenda. The re-created animals are somewhat controversial since their connection to the Nazis is a reminder of the Holocaust. However, Ackerman presents the beauty of the forest and the animals who live in it, perhaps knowing that that is what Antonina would have focused on as well.

Her description of Warsaw shows a city that has gone through a lengthy period of recovery, but has become a beautiful place where people flourish and culture thrives. Her description of the mermaid statue is a fitting ending to the book since it she sees it as a symbol of Antonina. The mermaid holds a sword and is a protector figure, just as Antonina was a protector to her Guests and family. In addition, a mermaid is half human and half animal. Antonina embodied certain animal characteristics in the way that she was able to make connections to animals.

## Vocabulary

roster, liberate, feasible, relentless, prudent, waylaid, momentous, influence, oddity, caricature, massacred, symbolic, commodity, dematerialized, iridescent, nuances, native, advocate, primeval, contend

# Important People

## Antonina Zabinski

Antonina is the protagonist and the wife to whom the title of the book refers. She was married to Jan who took over the directorship of the Warsaw Zoo in the early days of their marriage. Antonina had a special way with animals and was able to calm even the most difficult residents of the zoo. She was in charge of caring for and feeding orphaned and ill animals. Her skill with difficult animals proved to be useful when the Germans invaded Poland and she sometimes had to deal with angry and dangerous Nazis.

Antonina kept the villa running while Jan worked with the Polish Underground to rescue Jews. Her compassion, intelligence, and quick thinking made it possible for the Underground to hide Jews, whom she referred to as Guests, at the zoo throughout the war. Antonina made certain the villa's Guests were fed and tried to keep an atmosphere of joy and curiosity in the home despite the devastation of the war. Her focus was mainly on her children and husband, but she treated all of her Guests like extended family, even keeping up with them after the war had ended.

## Jan Zabinski

Jan, Antonina's husband, was the director of the Warsaw Zoo at the time that the Germans invaded Poland in World War II. As a zookeeper, Jan was intelligent and treated the animals with respect. He believed in building enclosures that reflected the natural environment of an animal. He also studied the psychology of animals. Jan was a practical man who enjoyed the risks he took while working with the Underground to rescue Jews. He helped to rescue hundreds of people and hid them at the zoo until they could be moved to safer places. Jan believed in having a plan and sticking to it. During the Uprising he was captured by the Germans and placed in a POW camp, but was released when the war ended. He worked to reopen the zoo after the war, but retired shortly after its reopening.

## Rys Zabinski

Rys was Antonina's and Jan's son and oldest child. Rys was still quite young when the Germans invaded, so Antonina worried about the effect the war would have on him. During the war, he helped sneak food to the Guests staying in the animal cages when his parents would instruct him to feed the animals. He had a great affinity for animals as a child, but lost several pets during the war. Rys's experiences during the war made him grow up more quickly than he should have had to. While writing the book, the author visited Rys to learn more about his parents and his life during the war. He was living in Warsaw and worked as a civil engineer.





## Teresa Zabinski

Teresa was Antonina's and Jan's daughter and youngest child. She was born during the war. Antonina believed the birth of her healthy daughter was a sign of hope. At the time the book was written, Teresa was living in Scandinavia with her husband.

## Magdalena Gross

Magdalena Gross was a famous sculptor who was one of Antonina's closest friends and a Guest at the villa. Magdalena had been a sculptor before meeting the Zabinskis, but began sculpting animals after a visit to the Warsaw Zoo. She became famous because of her animal sculptures, which made her a dangerous Guest to have at the villa since she might be recognized. In fact, Magdalena was recognized by a former employee of the zoo, so she was moved to a safer place. Magdalena married Maurycy Fraenkel while they were still in hiding.

## Maurycy Fraenkel

Maurycy was a Jewish lawyer who lived in the Ghetto. He was a friend of the Zabinskis and also a dear friend of Magdalena's. When he came to live at the villa as a Guest, he was sickly and suffered from a nervous condition because of all he had witnessed. He spent his first days there sitting at Antonina's bedside while she was ill. Eventually he recovered and he and Magdalena married while in hiding elsewhere.

## Fox Man

Fox Man, whose real name was Witold Wroblewski, was a Polish man who was raised in Germany. When the Germans decided to convert the zoo into a fur farm, they put Fox Man in charge of it. Fox Man was eccentric. He used his cat as a wet nurse for the baby foxes and had several parakeets as pets. He moved into the villa and proved to be a trustworthy friend. He played piano and often played for the Guests in the evenings. Fox Man and his animals were moved to Germany during the Uprising.

## Lutz Heck

Lutz Heck was a German zookeeper and a Nazi. He offered to take the Zabinskis remaining zoo animals to his zoo in Germany when the zoo was destroyed by the war. However, he only took the animals he considered valuable and staged a shooting party to kill the rest. Heck was interested in back-breeding to resurrect extinct species of animals, such as the aurochs and tarpan.



## **Szymon Tenenbaum**

Szymon was an entomologist with an enormous insect collection that Jan kept at the zoo for safekeeping during the war. When a German officer arrived at the villa to view the collection, Jan used the opportunity to build a relationship that allowed him to freely enter the Ghetto. He used his access to smuggle out several Jews.

## **Henryk Goldszmit / Janusz Korczak**

Janusz Korczak is the pen name of Henryk Goldszmit. He was an author and also ran an orphanage in the Ghetto. He was offered several opportunities to leave the Ghetto, but refused because he knew the children needed him. When the children were taken to Treblinka to be killed, he went with them to die because he knew his presence would lessen their fears. The Poles have since claimed him as a martyr and the Israelis consider him one of the Thirty-Six Just Men, who are men with clean souls that make it possible for the world to be saved.



# Objects/Places

## Warsaw Zoo

The Warsaw Zoo is the primary setting of the book. The zoo was designed in accordance with the belief that the animal enclosures should closely mirror natural habitats. At the beginning of the book, the zoo is described as a paradise filled with animal sounds and fragrant plants. When the zoo was bombed, it lost its beauty, but became a place of refuge for Jews fleeing the Ghetto. Antonina and Jan used the empty animal enclosures to hide their Jewish Guests while arrangements were made for them to move on to safer places. After the war, Jan and Antonina rebuilt the zoo before Jan retired.

## Villa

The villa was the house on the grounds of the Warsaw Zoo where the Zabinskis lived. Before the war, it was a beautiful home with big windows that let in a lot of sunshine. When the war broke out, the windows were covered according to blackout regulations and the Zabinskis began hiding Jews there. Though it lost its natural beauty, the zoo became a place of compassion and the people there were an unconventional family.

## Lampshade Shop

When Warsaw was under attack and the zoo was evacuated, Antonina and Rys stayed in a lampshade shop that was on the bottom floor of Antonina's sister-in-law's apartment building. She did not feel safe in the fourth-floor apartment, so she knocked on the door of the lampshade shop and found that the elderly woman who ran the shop were providing refuge for several other people as well.

## Ghetto

The Ghetto was a section of Warsaw that the Nazis walled off and confined the Jewish people of Warsaw to. The area was crowded because so many people were forced to live in such a small amount of space. Jan gained access to the Ghetto and used his connections to help Jews to escape.

## Wicek

Wicek was Rys's pet rabbit. He was an unusual rabbit with a big personality. The author describes him as a thug because he loved to steal food, including meat, and often chewed up people's personal belongings, like clothes. Wicek was the only pet that Antonina and Rys took with them when they left the zoo during the height of the



Uprising. While they were staying in the schoolhouse, Rys gave the rabbit to brothers that he became friends with. His gift indicated how important their friendship was to him.

## Piano

There was a piano in the villa that served two purposes: it was a warning system and also a source of entertainment. Antonina used the piano to play “Go, go, go to Crete” to warn the guests when a stranger or a German was approaching the villa. This was their signal to hide. The piano also served as a source of entertainment in the evenings when the guests would gather and listen to Fox Man play for them.

## Country Home

Jan and Antonina had a house in the country that they used as a vacation home. Before the war broke out, Antonina took Rys to stay there for the summer on a vacation. While they were there, the threat of war became imminent and they eventually returned home to the villa.

## Schoolhouse

Antonina and Rys stayed in a schoolhouse when they were forced to leave the zoo during the Uprising. The schoolhouse was on an old estate and Antonina and Rys became friends with the people who owned it. Rys grew close with the couple’s sons and gave them his pet rabbit. He also enjoyed following their father around and learning how to do and make things.

## Insect Collection

Jan stored the extensive insect collection of Szymon Tenenbaum at the zoo. The insect collection became Jan’s way of gaining access to the Ghetto when a German officer came to see it after hearing about it from Szymon. Jan convinced the German that he needed to occasionally see Szymon, who was confined to the Ghetto, to discuss the care of the collection. After that, Jan was able to freely enter the Ghetto, so he used his access to help Jews escape.

## Bialowieza Forest

The Bialowieza Forest is an ancient forest near Warsaw. Today, it is a natural preserve and home to the re-created species of tarpan horses and aurochs cattle. These species were extinct, but were re-created through the efforts of the Nazis, including Lutz Heck, who had an interest in back-breeding animals to create a “pure” animal.

# Themes

## Animal Motif

Ackerman centers the book around an animal motif, which is fitting since Antonina and Jan ran the Warsaw Zoo and animals were an integral part of their lives. Ackerman uses the motif to strengthen themes, explain human behavior, and show the passing of time.

The animal motif is used to strengthen the themes about family, home, and compassion. Several animals were members of the Zabinski family throughout the course of the book, including a badger, a rabbit, a chicken, a hamster, and a pig. Ackerman pays attention to the descriptions and stories of these animals in the same way she does the Guests who also become members of the family. The theme of home is strengthened through the animal motif when Ackerman explains that Antonina believed animals were essential to making a house a home because they brought a sense of curiosity and fun. They also provided an important distraction from the war, making it possible for people to focus on something other than their problems for a while. The theme of compassion is strengthened through the animal theme in that Antonina and Jan treated their animals with compassion. Antonina served as a midwife to pregnant zoo animals and cared for those that were sick or orphaned.

Ackerman explains human behavior and delivers ideas about society and things that were happening through the animal motif. One example of this is the use of Heck's back-breeding program to re-create extinct species of animals. Ackerman explains his plan in detail because the breeding of animals is something that most readers can relate to. She then draws a parallel to the Nazi agenda of creating a master race, which is somewhat harder to understand because the idea of breeding humans is a foreign and disturbing concept. Ackerman also uses the story of the hamster's mother killing its littermates to talk about the inexplicable cruelty that sometimes occurs in the world. Wicek and Kubo provide fodder for discussing the way that humans relate to one another. Kubo was rejected by the other chickens, but Wicek, a rabbit, accepted him as a friend and allowed the chicken to ride on his back. Kubo can be compared to the outcast Jews and Wicek can be compared to the Poles who took them in.

The animal motif helps Ackerman to provide clues about the passage of time since she frequently describes what animals would be doing at the time of the year in which the action was taking place. For example, she talked about hibernation to indicate fall and migration to indicate spring. She also talked about the Zabinskis structuring their own lives according to the schedule of animals and stated that Antonina referred to the time in which the hamster lived at the villa as "The Hamster Era."



## Courageous Acts in Weak Positions

Throughout *The Zookeeper's Wife*, Ackerson examines the idea that people in weak positions can be capable of extraordinary courage. This is certainly the case with Antonina, who is a woman in a country under attack by the Germans. Antonina has no special connections, political powers, or even weapons to keep herself and her family safe; she has only her wits and determination. In spite of her lowly position, Antonina vows to help Jan rescue as many Jews as possible even though doing so puts them all in grave danger. During the course of the war, Antonina uses her quick thinking and ability to calm people during confrontations with soldiers to survive and keep her Guests hidden.

Ackerman explores the courageous acts of a number of people who lived in Warsaw during World War II. She writes about some of the Jews who were confined to the Ghetto and the courage that was necessary to help others and to make it through the war. The Jews certainly had the least power of any of the people in the city of Warsaw at the time, yet they still faced their hardship with courage. Janusz Korczak is perhaps Ackerman's greatest example of the courage of the downtrodden Jews. Korczak courageously refused to leave the Ghetto even though he was given numerous opportunities to do so. Instead, he stayed with the children at the orphanage and went to his death beside them because he knew it would make them less fearful.

Many Poles participated in Underground activities, including Jan, at the risk of being arrested and killed. Harboring Jews was punishable by the death of the person caught aiding the Jew as well as that person's entire family and their neighbors, yet many Poles aided in the rescue of Jews. Jan and Antonina had more than 300 people go through their zoo during the course of the war, and each one of them posed a risk to the family.

Ackerman also writes about the youths who bravely assisted in Underground activities. Members of scout troops, which were outlawed at the time, helped the Underground to commit acts of sabotage against the Germans. These youths were certainly in weak positions since they were only children and had little power in the face of German aggressions.

## Family is More Than Blood Relatives

Ackerman uses the people who filter through the zoo to show that a family can be made up of more than just people who are related by blood. In fact, Ackerman indicates a family can even include animals. At the beginning of the book, the Zabinskis were a small family of three, plus their many pets. Though Jan and Antonina probably always thought of their animals as part of the family, their position as family members solidifies as the war makes their presence essential to the well-being of the people at the villa. Ackerman shows that the animals were members of the family by writing about their stories in much the same way she writes about the people who also became part of the villa family. She writes about the personalities of the animals and the beginnings, and in some cases, endings of their stories, just as she does the people.



Ackerman also indicates that Antonina considered her Guests to be part of the family as well. She treated them like family and took care of them the same way she took care of her own children and her mother-in-law. Ackerman suggests that Antonina's inclusion of the Guests as family may have stemmed from the fact that Antonina was an orphan herself, so likely understood how important it was to have people to love and rely on. After the war, Antonina kept in touch with her former Guests just as she probably would have kept track of sisters, cousins, or aunts and uncles if she had had them.

The Guests also clearly considered the Zabinskis family as well as is evidenced by the way they helped Antonina when she was in need as well. When Antonina was bedridden for a long period of time, her Guests took care of her and also took over the housework. Antonina wrote about their care in her diary in a way that suggested she thought of them as the family she had not had growing up. When Jan was harsh with Antonina because of the stress he was under, the Guests came together around Antonina like a family and gave Jan the silent treatment until he realized how he had been acting. Finally, when Theresa was born, the villa Guests had a christening party for the baby and celebrated with good food and fun just the way a family would.

## What Makes a Home

In *The Zookeeper's Wife*, Ackerman examines what makes a home and suggests that home is far more than just a building. The book begins with describing Antonina's beautiful home in a way that makes it sound like paradise. The villa was surrounded by fragrant trees and animal sounds that Ackerman compares to a symphony. It was filled with sunlight and decorated with artifacts. However, all of that was lost when the zoo was hit by bombs, the animals were taken away or killed, and the big windows were covered for blackout conditions. The villa underwent such a drastic change that it hardly seemed like Antonina's home anymore. Though there was nothing Antonina could do about the damage or having to keep the windows covered, she rebuilt her home by focusing on the things that really make a house a home. She was determined to maintain a home filled with fun, curiosity, music, and love.

Animals were one of the things she deemed essential to a home since they made life more fun through their antics and gave people something to focus their attentions on. They were a source of comfort for Rys and for many of the Guests, including Maurycy, who befriended a hamster, and Fox Man, who loved his cat and parakeets. The animals gave the villa family something to talk about at dinner when they did funny things like getting stuck in the chimney, as Szczurcio muskrat did.

Another thing Antonina thought was important in a home was music. While she did use music as a warning signal during the day, at night the villa family would gather around to listen to piano music played by Antonina or Fox Man.

Above all, Antonina clearly believed that people were the key to what made a house a home. She welcomed each Guest as a family member and cared for every one of them. When she and Rys moved to the schoolhouse during the Uprising, she was separated



from her Guests, but made new friends with the Kokots, whom she apparently spent a great deal of time with.

## The Importance of Compassion

At the core of Antonina's story is compassion and Ackerman uses the book to show how important it is for people to have compassion for one another. Without the compassion of the Poles, every Jew in Warsaw may have died during the war. Instead, the compassionate acts of the Zabinskis and others like them allowed many Jews to escape.

Antonina is the central focus of the theme of compassion. Even before the war, Antonina was an exceedingly compassionate woman as could be seen through the way she took care of the animals in her home and at the zoo. This compassion naturally spilled over to the people in need during the war. Before they began harboring Jews at the zoo, Antonina made packets of food for Jan to deliver to hungry people in the city as he went about his daily job. Once they made the decision to hide Jews at the zoo, Antonina's compassion helped her to make room for Guests even when she thought they could take on no more, as was the case when the Kenigsweins arrived.

Ackerman also discusses the theme of compassion by sharing stories of people outside of the villa, such as Cywinski who went into debt and sold his own house so that he could help as many Jews as possible. Rabbi Shapira is another example of a compassionate person. He ministered to his fellow Jews in the Ghetto with spiritual help and by assisting with their more practical needs, like food. The people of Warsaw were also compassionate toward the zoo animals and the pigs who lived at the zoo after the zoo animals were gone. They saved their scraps to help feed the animals, thereby showing compassion to both the animals and to the Zabinskis.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this theme is that Ackerman also shows compassion through some of the enemy soldiers. For example, Antonina saw a moment of compassion from the soldiers who played a cruel trick on her by threatening to kill her children. When they saw that she was close to fainting, they urged her to sit down. She believed that their compassion was a sign that there was no such thing as pure evil. When a group of Russian soldiers entered the villa for the purpose of looting it, one of them had a change of heart after Antonina reminded him of the women in his own life. He told the other soldiers to put everything back and to leave. Ackerman's purpose for showing compassion through the enemy may be to suggest that all human beings are capable of compassion.



# Styles

## Structure

The book consists of 36 chapters. The book starts in 1935 before the German attack on Warsaw with some background information about Antonina and Jan and how they came to be zookeepers at the Warsaw Zoo. Chapter 34, which contains the conclusion of the plot, ends in 1945. Chapter 35 is subtitled “Aftermath” and reveals the fates of the major characters following the war. Chapter 36 is set in the present and is divided into two parts. The first part describes the Bialowieza Forest today. The second part describes present day Warsaw.

## Perspective

The Zookeeper’s Wife is written in third person from the perspective of Antonina. It is written in past tense. The book is a non-fiction work and adheres to the genre in that it recounts true historical facts backed up by research, but it also contains elements of a fiction book in that the author engages in sections of vivid description and utilizes conventions like metaphors that are more often seen in a work of fiction.

## Tone

At the outset of the book, the tone is bright and hopeful. Antonina is living her ideal life with a husband and son that she loves surrounded by animals that fascinate her and a beautiful villa. The author uses rich descriptions to give the reader a clear picture of how wonderful life at the zoo must have been for Antonina before the war. She uses musical terms to describe the sounds of the animals and compares the zoo to Eden. When the war starts and the zoo and city are bombed, the tone of the novel turns dark. The author describes the animals’ sounds using words like “moaning” and “sobbing.” The destroyed buildings are described like wounded people. At the close of the book, the tone is hopeful when Antonina and Jan are reunited and the zoo is rebuilt.

## Quotes

Her uncanny ability to calm unruly animals earned her the respect of both the keepers and her husband, who, though he believed in science could not explain it, found her gift nonetheless strange and mysterious.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1)

**Importance:** This quote describes Antonina’s way with animals, which was important not only in her work with the animals, but also in the way she interacted with people. Antonina had a way of communicating with both animals and people on an almost psychic level. She used this skill on more than one occasion to calm angry German soldiers who threatened her safety or the safety of her family and friends.

Stay prepared for this world the rest of your life, a child’s brain tells itself, a world of mayhem and uncertainty.

-- Narrator (chapter 4)

**Importance:** This quote reveals Antonina’s worries about her son witnessing the ravages of war. Antonina was orphaned at the age of nine when her parents were shot for being members of the intelligentsia, so she was aware of how witnessing violence can change a child’s outlook on life. She worried that Rys would be changed by the war and that it would take away his childhood.

The moaning of lions and yowling of tigers spiraled from the big cat house where she knew cat mothers, ‘crazy with fear, were grabbing their young by the scruff of the neck and pacing their cages, anxiously looking for a safer place to hide them.

-- Narrator / Antonina (chapter 4)

**Importance:** The author uses quotes from Antonina’s diary to interject her voice into the story. In this case, Antonina was describing the panicked sounds of the animals when bombs began to hit Warsaw. This quote is particularly important because the author later uses the image of a mother lion trying to hide her young from danger to describe Antonina’s feelings when she and Rys were forced to leave the zoo and stay in her sister-in-law’s apartment during the fighting.

They reminded her of ‘people embarrassed by their wounds, looking for a way to cover the openings in their abdomens.

-- Narrator / Antonina (chapter 6)

**Importance:** Antonina and the author described Warsaw after it was bombed using terms that gave the buildings human attributes. The author goes on to use words like “exposed blood-red bricks steaming” and “entrails of homes still smoldering.” The use of this metaphor makes the destruction of the city easier for the reader to imagine and also evokes a stronger emotion.



Because the aurochs went extinct in the 1600s, recent in evolutionary terms, Heck felt sure he could reconstruct it, and in so doing save it, too, from 'racial degeneration.

-- Narrator (chapter 8)

**Importance:** The resurrection of extinct species was one of the reasons that Lutz Heck saved some of the animals from the Warsaw Zoo. His desire to create a pure species of cattle is in line with the Nazi ideal of creating a "pure" race of humans, the Aryan race. The author uses Heck's work toward breeding cattle to explain the Nazi agenda through her motif of animals.

I don't understand all the fuss. If any creature is in danger, you save it, human or animal.

-- Jan (chapter 13)

**Importance:** This quote exemplifies the author's theme of compassion. Jan did not see the risks he took as part of the Underground as being heroic. Instead, they were merely the right thing to do.

Warned not to breathe a word of the Guests to anyone, ever, no matter whom, he knew that if he slipped up, he, his parents, and everyone in the house would be murdered.

-- Narrator (chapter 14)

**Importance:** Rys was under tremendous pressure as a child to keep the villa's secrets. His worries manifested themselves in a desire to take on a more grown-up role than a child his age should have and through sometimes snapping at his mother that she could not understand war because she was a woman. He also refused to go to sleep at night until his father and the members of the household were safely home at curfew.

Its message is subversive, ridiculing the overlords and championing peace and love—the perfect signal for the villa's Helens and Parises. Even better, it was by a Jewish composer at a time when playing Jewish music was a punishable offense.

-- Narrator (chapter 15)

**Importance:** This quote explains Antonina's use of the song "Go, go, go to Crete!" from the opera *La Belle Helene* as the signal for the Guests to hide because a stranger or a German was approaching the villa. Her choice of song reveals Antonina's sense of humor and her daring spirit.

Anticipating their calamity and fright when deportation day came (August 6, 1942), he joined them aboard the train bound for Treblinka.

-- Narrator (chapter 20)

**Importance:** This quote occurs in one of the most poignant chapters of the book in which Ackerman tells the story of author Janusz Korczak who ran an orphanage in the Ghetto. Korczak refused to leave the children even though he was given several opportunities to escape. When the children were scheduled to go to Treblinka where they would be executed, Korczak went with them to his death so that they would be less



frightened. Ackerman includes his story in the book as an example of the theme of compassion.

Without documents he couldn't register anywhere, so officially he ceased to exist for a long time, living among friends but gaunt and ghostly, one of the disappeared. He had lost many voices: the lawyer's, the impresario's, the lover's, and it isn't surprising that he found speaking or even coherence difficult.

-- Narrator (chapter 23)

**Importance:** This quote describes Maurycy Fraenkel's condition when he came to stay at the villa. He was suffering from nervous condition due to the stress of the war and the knowledge that his presence could mean the death of whomever he stayed with. At first, he rarely spoke, walked stooped over, and spent most of his time at Antonina's bedside while she was ill. As time went on, the atmosphere and the people of the villa helped to heal him so that his back straightened and he regained his voice.

When people are constantly on the brink of life and death, it's better to know as little as possible.

-- Antonina (chapter 30)

**Importance:** This was Antonina's attitude toward Jan's work with the Underground. She was aware that he took risks, but did not wish to know the details of what he did from day to day because it would only cause her to worry more.

When she approached them and silently stood her ground, she sensed scavengers darting around her 'like hyenas' racing into the rooms. 'If they guess my fear, they'll devour me,' she thought.

-- Narrator / Antonina (chapter 31)

**Importance:** This quote is an example of the animal motif the author uses to frame the book. In this case, the Russian soldiers who enter the villa to loot it are compared to hyenas, which are vicious scavengers.



# Topics for Discussion

## Antonina

How did Antonina's life before the war prepare her for helping to rescue Jews during the war? What did she learn from working with animals that helped her deal with people?

## Setting and Tone

How does the way the author describes the zoo before the war differ from the way she describes it after the bombings? What words does she use? How does the tone of the book change?

## Lutz Heck and the Nazi Agenda

How does the author use Lutz Heck's desire to re-create extinct animal species to explain the Nazi agenda? Why does she explain their agenda in this manner?

## Cryptonyms

Why did the Underground use cryptonyms? What did the cryptonyms show about the people who chose them and the people they were given to? For example, what does the cryptonym of "Francis" say about the people who chose it for Jan and what does it say about Jan himself?

## Rabbi Shapira and Janusz Korczak

Why does Ackerman write about Rabbi Shapira and Janusz Korczak even though they were not Guests of the zoo? What do their stories say about people and what was lost during the Holocaust?

## Family

How were the people and animals at the villa like a family? How does Ackerman show that Antonina thought of them as a family?

## Rys

How did the war affect Rys? Why did he change when they went to live in the schoolhouse? When the author visited him while researching the book, did it seem as though the war had any lasting effects on his life?



## **Animal Psychology**

How did Antonina and Jan use animal psychology to their advantage during the war?

## **Interactions with Soldiers**

Why does the author include stories in which soldiers show some compassion toward Antonina? What did their actions indicate to Antonina?

## **Author's Purpose**

Why did the author choose to write this book as Antonina's story, rather than as Jan's? What message did she hope to communicate to readers through the book?